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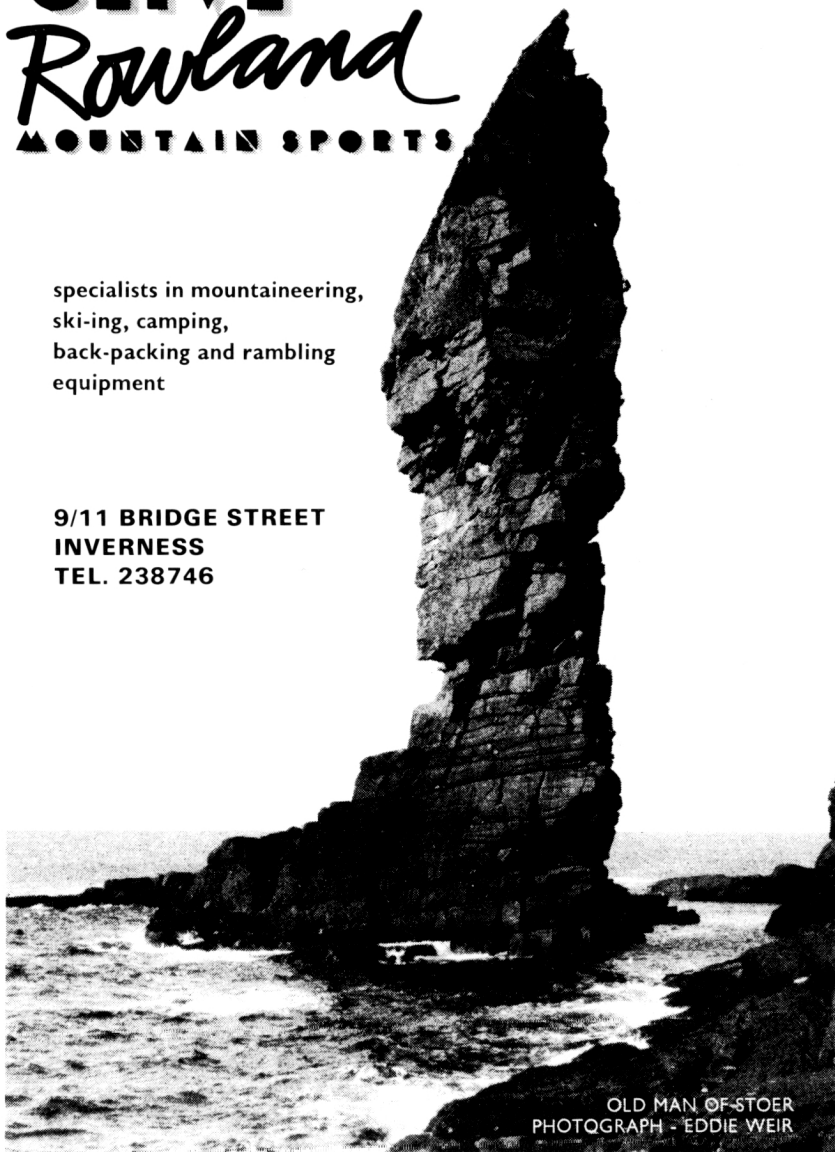
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OLD MAN OF-STOER  
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## SALAMANDER

By John Mackenzie

LIKE GHOSTS from the past, our memories constantly remind us of previous aspirations, those waking dreams that haunt us so mercilessly and so effectively. Driven by past endeavour and future challenge, the inner demon gnaws at the soul to restlessly explore and turn over each sod as if our version of truth could only be realised by that next journey into the unknown. Some of us are content with our previous lot, past challenges met and overcome, resting on those dreams of success and failure that provide the buffer, the bulwark, against age and failing powers. But why, one asks, are some not content to share this accepted norm; what is it about us as a breed that defies easy categorisation as simply mad, bad or sad? Do we turn our collective and individual thoughts upwards to escape intolerable low ground pressures or inadequacies or have we, individually, found the true discipline and the only worthwhile path to salvation as we see it? We have enough trouble explaining all this to ourselves, let alone to those of more sceptical bent; rather than bend the metaphysical into the merely plausible, by conjuring with abstract words, to arrive at a satisfactory solution that temporarily rests until displaced by better, let's take a journey to see if any of this can be explained while it is actually happening and note what is done.

For a start let's get over this ridiculous notion of 'we' in the article, which puts you in the role of a passive spectator, and instead include you as a fellow traveller, because in the real world 'we' are concerned about 'us' as individuals. Rather than generalise and try to take in all aspects of our game and spread the load over-thinly, I will concentrate on a single adventure; replaying the concept and resolution as it actually happened with the sole purpose of seeing if it helps resolve or explain any of our motives. You, as reader, will have to tag along as the invisible third-party, judging and approving or disapproving of our actions as the story unfolds.

I will choose a remote, lonely crag in a remote, lonely spot; no audience, no critical crowds, no applause, no jeers. Perhaps you prefer the limelight, the spotlight of critical opinion that looks for the slightest waver that robs the chance of success. Bear with me, I have had my fill of that down south, and living in the far north I have a chance to explore. I could have chosen innumerable roadside crags, each with their own strong characters and routes to match, some bold some not, but somehow at the end of the day do you not agree that when pressed, it is the major line, the big route which has to more closely explain our motives. A person is judged, after all, by their best work, not by their doodles.

Perhaps the most important single element is the dream. My friend Bob says he has seen this amazing line left of The Lizard; so has Martin. Robbie has even tried the first 100ft or so, but no farther. A great grey ghost of a slab, pale and probably hostile – would we have it any other way, would we be interested in it if it was broken and manifestly easy? – It is smooth, there are no give-away secrets of weakness; the element of doubt and even trepidation creep in just talking about it. And it is the talking about the unknown which is, of course, so fatally attractive. The known has been mapped, the imagination is left with dry statistics. We can either do it or not, the outcome is only in doubt if we push the limit of skill or conditions.

The best dreams of the unknown plague with angles, and in those dreams the slabs rear up impossibly steep and smooth; holds, cracks and protection are noticeable by their absence. In my imaginings I am pushed to my limit, miles up, a pimple on the proverbial elephant's backside and looking at ripples that give no hint as to their helpfulness. How far do you want to push it? Are you so young and bold that the thought of death or disablement lies easily in the equation? On this I draw back, a frightened slug withdrawing its horns in a blue funk. Pragmatic dreaming suggests that to boldly go where no man has gone before might be fine for the 'Starship Enterprise' but not for me. Sorry. I see perhaps you are bolder than me and more talented, but there we are, imperfections do tend to raise their heads in times of stress. On sight in winter is fine as, often, what you see is what you get, but on long hostile looking summer lines then at least an abseil inspection to clean off the scruffiest bits of moss and to see if any protection is possible is surely allowable. Deep down I want to both enjoy the success and live to tell the tale; obviously I take my hat off to those who can whoop it up doing impossible looking lines at first glance but I am not one of them. So, mentally, the adventure is already made less so by the admission that a 'ground-up' approach is not on. Fear is a great leveller. I am long in tooth, Bob even longer, and at the least I wish to equal his longevity.

The next consideration is the competition – already in our minds there are hordes of climbers at that very moment thinking of our very route. Names rapidly come to mind. Perhaps they are on it at this very hour, gleefully reappearing in the pub later to crow of their success at the expense



of ours. I'm sure you recognise the paranoid tendencies in yourself; no punishment is keen enough for the new-route stealer on what you consider is 'your' crag. We console ourselves that since cleaning is important and remoteness a fact, the competition, if any, can probably, but not entirely, be discounted. New routes are therefore seen as select trophies, prizes whose worth is directly proportional to the amount of effort needed to attain them. Sometimes I wonder if there is any material object on this earth as satisfying as a classic new route; it is an art object, a natural sculpture, an acquisition which both personally identifies you and yet is seen as an aspiration by others, though at no time can it ever belong to you in any real sense except the spiritual. How can man's baubles and trinkets compare with a great line on a great cliff? This unworldly possession is one of the keystones of why we climb.

Now that the germ of desire is sown, a plan for action is needed. We will need all the cleaning ropes, wire brushes, the cut-down redundant ice-axes to clean cracks, climbing gear and ropes. All this weighs! There is 1000ft of extra-steep heathery and be-cragged hillside before we even reach the base of the cliff and then tortuous and probably precarious scrambling up its flanks to get to its crest, something like 1500ft in all. At least we can drive along the lonely glen near its base. We have been talking and dreaming of this route for long enough, putting off the evil day, for despite all those dreams, the effort needed in cleaning heathery cracks is well known to us and softer options have been appearing throughout the year, leaving us in late summer with nowhere else to go but here.

I love the long, dead end glen, itself the off-shoot of an even longer and lovelier dead-end glen. The track is rough and stony, and dirt is spitting up from the wheels of this ridiculous vehicle I find myself in, a fully grown Campervan, complete with toilet and kitchen, bumping along this narrow road fit only for extraction vehicles. However, the trees hide the view and what with the swirl of dust the crags are reserved only for those who are sitting in the front. I always find approaches psychologically interesting, as I'm sure you must do as well. Sometimes it's light hearted, sometimes it's a grim silent business, thoughts kept well to oneself; often you hope to see the chosen line looking easier than your imagination has built it up to be. The whole balancing act between simply dreaming about it and then actually setting out to do it can be difficult, a slightly uncomfortable act of faith.

Bob and I have grown to become Bob, Colin and I. Three is bad for speed but good for cleaning. It is a fine day, cold but clear with the crag above visibly dry. Going up a steep hillside overlaid with gear is a trial by any definition. This is not the first time, neither will it be the last I expect. Isn't it curious what goes through one's head when placing one foot in front of another on an arduous slope? Initially there is little rhythm, the mind wanders fairly loosely about, cannoning off aspects either underfoot or



ahead, but when the first hard breathing sets in and the easiest line chosen is topmost in thought then the mind sets itself little jingles or incantations to ease the physical labour, higher mental processes having been subsumed in order to create a wholeness with the body. It is the first stage in trance, a narrowing of objectives and, most importantly, the mental sloughing off of the everyday world.

While Bob wilfully chooses a line independent of ours, we take a more direct line up a horrible scree-filled gully with short outcrops. This was not a good idea, laden as we are. Handfuls of heather and clutches of loose blocks occupy us for awhile until we clear this barrier. There is something very trying about stepping over little terraces of rank heather; no step ever seems high enough to properly clear it. At the foot of the crag the steepness of the slabs is now apparent, great plaques of a light grey schist with corner lines filled with heather. Tenuous possibilities rise up from the base, often to fade into obscurity and a frightening blankness. Like the sea, there is little to hide behind, few areas of visible comfort ease the eye. There are a few thin heather ledges perched here and there but the connection between them is problematic.

The central rib where the original line, The Lizard, wends its way up a groove, borders a fantastic slab that stretches up for 500ft with every chance of improbability on its journey to the top. A big dog-legged crack covers the initial 140ft, human progress having been stopped where the crack thins and angles left. Above, a smooth slab appears to form a wall, very unlikely looking from where I'm standing and above that another slab sports a great crescent-shaped shield before running into a hidden corner. Finally, a near vertical wall ends the route where an off-width crack cuts it directly in half. All in all it is some line and potentially very good indeed. Will my ambition be realised, and how much would I really give for something which I, – you, – really wish for? A fingernail? A finger? An arm and a leg? Your life? Don't dismiss this as trite; many climbers have died for such prizes like the Eiger North Wall. Some tread the thin line between reason and unreason better than others. Some are doomed to die, they have it marked on their faces, others have the bearing of survivors, sadder, wiser, but still here. Mostly we err on the safe side but always in the background there is the choice for that great leap into the unknown, the game of chance between the devil within and the poised statistics of real risk.

After much hawing about and ferreting here, there and everywhere, we reach the crest. The top wall is set back from a terrace and it makes sense to set up an abseil from this and clean the top wall later. I play around for a few minutes on the wall, an off-width chimney that soon narrows to a soaring crack, stuffed with heather and perched blocks. It looks amazing but needs those blocks cleared first. Once embarked on action it is extraordinary – as I'm sure you'll agree – how you slip into a mechanical

*Bob Brown climbing 'Salamander' on the West Buttress of Creag Ghlas, Sgurr A' Mhuillin. Photo: John Mackenzie.*

*Sgurr Alasdair, Skye. Photo: Alastair Mathewson.*









mode. Abstract philosophy, so important in defining our motivation now has no place once the actual climbing starts. All such thoughts outwith the actual event therefore belong to the realm of retrospection and a dimming memory.

We have absolutely no idea at all what lies below. The ropes spin in the air for a moment and are gone. Each of us has set up a course of action mutually independent of the other. Colin is to clean the corner below. Bob to set up his ropes from any available anchor below that and I to set up a flotilla of ropes to reach the ground after having descended down the other two. We have a fair amount of gear but no pitons as they seem unnecessary. At least Colin's rope is well secured as I slide down after Bob. A brilliant corner is going past my nose, pink rock with few holds and a heather stuffed corner crack. Colin will be spending his time cleaning this!

Bob has now shuffled alarmingly off to the left and is busy digging out what looks like a pathetic little ear of rock to abseil off. There is something stomach-churningly gripping about shuffling about on one's bottom on a narrow ledge between the end of one abseil rope and the beginning of another. The evaluation of genuine risk has to come in here. Is there justification in these heart stopping manoeuvres, unroped and hundreds of feet off the ground? Easy enough ground perhaps but only justifiable up here due to the past accumulation of experience.

Climbing, in essence, is a series of alternating states between fear and relief, doubt and hope, each individual using his or her own very special mental faculties to deal with these in a way unique to them. We all know one man's terror is merely another's marginal niggle.

Bob's little ear has grown somewhat between the start and finish of my shuffle and a chance to see him test his creative anchor is sufficient enticement for me to follow down the next stretch. This is the great shield of rock perched like a scab atop a slowly steepening convexity. Thin, V-shaped cracks split the rock like shallow wounds, a feature of this crag. It did not look, taken objectively, too difficult but then abseils always lie. I like floating down this great inclined plane, a grey ocean of rock set on its lonely hillside amidst the cold clear air of the North. I reach a ledge worthy of the name and a really solid set of blocks where a less worrying anchor can be arranged.

Initially, my ropes go over the ominous bulging slab above the great dog legged crack. A couple of bulges and sparse but good gear offer hope. I have an intuitive sense based on past routes that the top bulge is going to provide the crux. The ropes have ended two thirds of the way down the lower slab, but since I will only have to clean the section above the dog-leg, then I should be able to swing across on to rising ground to escape, leaving the lower crack as it is.

Gardening as we euphemistically call grouting out of cracks and scrubbing clean lichen is probably frowned upon by our greener brethren. However,



in defence may I quickly add there is simply so much rank heather here that the occasional cleaned crack makes no difference, visually or botanically, to the overall health of the crag, so I will simply draw a veil over the matter. My case rests on the over proliferation of common vegetation and the relatively marginal impact sensitive cleaning does. The repetitive and muscle-crunching nature of hanging off a rope and cleaning a deep crack is immensely satisfying. Here is real sculpture, releasing the rock from its bondage of roots and seeing fresh crystals shine in the light of day. No person has ever touched this rock before; its sinuosity and simplicity of form a single crack amid blank slabs is stunningly attractive.

It is also desperately tiring. We have all been cleaning for seven hours by the time we reach the base of the crag and late August days are not so long as those in May. I do a precarious swing to one side, just managing to reach bottom at the very end of the ropes. It is imperative to get some fluid intake to lessen the cramps in my arms. A late lunch follows over on the boulders well to the right of the crag, our usual gearing up and eating spot. We brush the dry earth off ourselves, poke out lichen from our eyes, don rock boots and gear and head in an optimistic threesome towards the base of the crack. The moment of truth to test all those dreams – is it going to be a desperate fight or a piece of cake or somewhere in between? No moves have been practised on the rope so nothing is sure. Funny how we have to invent artificial rules in order to make life just that little bit harder for us, to subtly weight the balance so that something is probably, but not definitely, possible.

Bob shoots up the lower straight bit of the crack and takes a belay just before it jinks out left. I follow on delightful wafers of rock, crinkly crisps and little horns and nubbins that fingers can pinch and pull on carefully. A feature of the climbing here is that the holds often appear as rather superficial crusts, wind and chemically eroded into less than substantial objects. Often all the holds, especially in cracks, lie to the right, giving a very awkward and sometimes blind form of movement as they are hidden. Rarely is it as difficult as it looks but equally rarely is it easy and a commitment to what lies above, the 'faith' part of climbing, is necessary.

Bob has unearthed an ancient stub of a piton. Someone had retreated here a long time ago; indeed the crack to this point was quite clean. Now while Colin lounges around below, escaping from the quite chill wind, I set off up the newly cleaned dog leg part of the crack. Gone are the encrustations that decorated the rock below, indeed gone is anything visibly helpful on the steep slabs above me. The crack is curious. It is more a shallow scoop that undulates, narrows and dilates again like a stone snake. By placing feet within the undulations and laying off the right edge, a surprisingly easy balance is reached. Fine as long as I keep my nerve and trust this frictional trickery. The whole feel is uncertain, the relative ease of progress is offset by an aura of difficulty. Apprehension remains that the ever steepening

angle will force a retreat just short of the ledge above and I am deeply suspicious of a snarling setback.

Every route on this crag has this apparent atmosphere of slickness, of the need for panther-like stealth, the lonely leader out on the edge of the world battling with the ever present threat of flesh ripping falls. But in fact it was simply not true, merely mind games, imagination borrowing from the stuff of nightmares. Optical illusion said that the last move was going to be 'something else'. I doubt it was more than a very sustained 4c, unbelievable but true, HVS but not high in the grade. One of the great and unexpected joys is to undertake what seems a difficult task only to find that fate laughs at your own fears as it reflects the mirror of doubt back at you.

We are now all reassembled on our stance, a perch in the wind and with glorious views over to the Torridon mountains. The smell of autumn is in the air, heavy scents cut across us and the purple of the heather and grey of the rock create that unique feeling that at this moment, unlike any other, we would rather be here than anywhere else on earth. These are wonderful, transient moments that reinforce the bonding between the earth and us. They never last long enough and the intensity is only dimly remembered afterwards. For a few seconds insight and intuition go hand in hand, a true freedom preciously gained, the very stuff of the visionary.

I am now elected to lead the next pitch, the unprotected one, on the principle hastily proposed by Bob that since I cleaned it I deserve it. Thank you, dear friend, I can always rely on you in a tight spot. Weak but dry humour is part of our game, like understatement; it serves to reduce the seriousness of a given situation, a mental armour that works best (only!) for those who propose it.

The slab is steep and looks distinctly unfriendly above a half-height overlap. A chance line of flakes runs across the lower section, exposed and unprotected, to the overlap above. This takes some good gear, which is as well as I end up doing a scruffy mantel on to a very thin heather ledge. My nose is pressed against holdless rock, so another gearless shuffle left leads to the only weakness in the top slab, an unhelpful looking affair that seemed distinctly easier from the abseil rope. Fooled again! In fact it is, like all else so far, easier than it appears to be with the occasional hold and a single good piece of gear. There is definitely a crux though, and with a considerable fall penalty – only by climbing can the truth be known. As people we are easily pleased, a bit of gear, the odd good hold and our world sparkles with sunshine again.

The afternoon is well advanced; the light getting low and the temperature distinctly chilly. The far West has louring dark clouds gathering gloom around the skirts of the hills; night is in the air and we are little more than halfway on our voyage. The suppressed panic of darkness begins to grow as a dark flower in my guts, the little tendrils growing like a cancer and instilling fear. An epic is brewing as Colin is climbing painfully slowly.



Impatience with one's fellow man in such circumstances is understandable but pointless.

Bob has a choice on the long shield-topped slab above. Broken cracks on the left have been left uncleaned and an obviously better but sterner central crack gardened instead. It is evidently more technical than his dismissive comments from the abseil indicated. Nasty, off-balance and shallowly flared to start, we are willing him to succeed on this precarious section and audible is our relief when he does. Above it is easier and off his restraining leash of technical difficulty, Bob flies up to the great curved overlap of the shield, a half-moon that blocks access to what lies above.

While he is engaged in finding his own solutions, I let the cool of the evening air relax me. Colin is an interesting man, full of the great days of the past and as we talk, I watch the sun find a brief glory as it dips below the indigo clouds, flooding the low ground with an orange light. The orb grows bigger as it lowers, a cold fire races across the hills tingeing everything it touches with that peculiar sadness of colour that is so hauntingly beautiful.

The ropes now ran up out of sight, Bob having turned the shield on the right. Our turn to climb comes soon after and I note that the initial moves are of a sustained, rather negative type of climbing leaving you wondering if it was difficult, awkward or what. You will no doubt recognise the feelings well enough. Above though, delightful moves on flakes lead swiftly to the overlap, much bigger now that it is at hand. An awkward step right then easier ground separates me from Bob, now athwart a rock like some Biblical patriarch, his sharp profile cutting the last of the evening wind.

Colin, climbing in the gloaming does well, perhaps I was too harsh in my thoughts earlier on. We might, with just one pitch left to the terrace, get down before true night begins. Bob's belay is inadequate, a pathetic hollow flake. The acceptance of the old adage that 'The Leader Never Falls' is of necessity now. The ropes are beginning to get twisted and to save time Bob will lead through while I unravel a vast amount of what is rapidly becoming the climbing equivalent of the Gordian Knot. A tricky slab undercuts a hanging corner, the depths of which are hidden to our left. Colin and I watch the initially tenuous moves across the slab lead unprotected to the overlap that guards the corner. Whatever you do Bob, don't fall here please! The cracks under the overlap are very wet and after an anxious moment he arranges some solid looking gear. Thank God for modern equipment. Hidden now by the corner we are startled by great guffaws and chortles as the sheer quality of the experience is relayed down to us. If it can be that good in near darkness, just imagine what it must be like in daylight.

It is good. Solidly sustained every inch of the way, a perfect end to a perfect route, bridging on dimples, constantly provoking. Colin emerges beaming, he cannot believe his luck, telling us that down south people

would kill for a route like this. We will have to come back for that top wall though, as the route should properly finish up it, but tonight is not the night. Our groping way off the terrace is probably the most dangerous part of the day, traversing over little walls that are effectively bottomless. The descent gully, a mirage of safety amid vertiginous heather and broken rock is scuttled down with that urgency which only those racing the night will ever know. We reach the boulders where the gear is stowed and then, hobbled by inadequately packed sacs, and festooned with ropes, descend the grim slopes back to the welcome lights of the Campervan, many, many hours after first setting out.

A short while later, so impressed are we by the quality, that Bob and I cleaned the soaring crack above the terrace and the left-hand cracks of the shield-topped slab. We climbed the route on a faultless sunny day, warm and windless with the scent of heather wafting up on thermals. The cracked slab was a grade easier than the original way and the top chimney cracks gave superb steep climbing at merely VS despite every appearance to the contrary. We still feel that the crag has given us its best route; certainly not its hardest, simply its best.

So, our dream had been fulfilled, were we then satiated, ready to look back upon those two days as some kind of highlight? Did the experience, realised without hint of disappointment, explain any more clearly the deeper questions? For a few days we were content, basking in the reflected glory of our own satisfaction. But then the ache returned. Why can we not be content with merely passive appreciation as in an art gallery? We have to crawl all over our 'art' to get to some deeper and fundamental understanding of the meaning of life itself. Perhaps we are driven souls, haunted by the promise and occasional realisation of great peace – and beauty – both within ourselves and within our surroundings. Despite jobs and restrictions of all shapes and sizes, despite great fears and self doubts, 'up there' represents a true life force, an essence of what is good and worthwhile; despite even our flawed personalities, we strive to attain a moral freedom based on self-integrity.

At times this integrity is circumscribed by our actions; we make the end justify the means even at the expense of our fellow man. Ambition can be naked, ugly and truly selfish. Perhaps it is simply not possible to pursue great goals without sacrifice. Indeed, if pressed sorely then that little inner voice might claim we are an elite, a Praetorian Guard, looking down on a lesser humanity who are struggling through a mire of mediocrity and dullness while we juggle with the forces of Eros and Thanetos like protogods. Dark though these thoughts are, there is much that is light. On balance, though, as a group we are no saints, we have evidently found a method of passing through life which is deeply fulfilling for mind and body. It may not be much of a conclusion, but at least we are willing to explore the possibilities, understanding ourselves better in the process, and by so doing, beginning to comprehend our fellow men.

## THE TRAP

By P.J. Biggar

SQUAT AND black and inimical to progress the fabled Mantrap barred the way. As I climbed the arete towards it, Dave Meldrum gave a shrug of aversion and backed off down to the Tough-Brown variation. His partner, Phil Gribbon, waved me towards the ample belays in the Mantrap's crack. That piece of rock was a physical obstacle we could not overcome, but we had another more pressing though intangible enemy – time. The moon was shining brightly on Carn Mor Dearg as I brought Mike Jacob up. We had been climbing for more than 11 hours. Jacob arrived only to hurry off in Meldrum's footsteps. Gribbon and I were left to contemplate nature which was extremely beautiful, and our feet, which were becoming cold.

To the right of our ledge, painfully hacked out of the most recalcitrant snow-ice, lay the steep and narrow way to the Forty-Foot Corner and possible salvation. Hideous depths plummeted in shadow below it. To the left, the foreshortened glassy walls of Little Brenva swept into the gentle basin of Coire Leis.

Normally, when Gribbon and I share a stance the atmosphere is genial, the talk humorous and bantering. This time we were like two old men who have met at the same bus-stop for 30 years and have nothing to say. Each wisp of warm vapour from dry lips was grudging. One short exchange contained a confession: 'We might need torches.'

'Mine's in the hut.'

'That wouldn't be intentional?'

'No.'

And the bus wouldn't come. The delicate curve on the frosted ropes remained unaltered. Minds flinched away from the subversive cold, seeking release in thought.

Why had we been so long? The weather was perfect. The condition of the snow almost too perfect – excessively hard, a stubborn unyielding material, points and picks had to be placed with abnormal exertion which was especially bad for the ancient Terrordactyls of the Gribbon-Meldrum rope; stances took many blows to cut and even then were cramped and full of aches . . . Excuses, excuses! We'd got off route. Gribbon swore he'd been that way before with Smart, but all that followed from that, I muttered to myself as I clawed my way along the chosen icy ledge, was that they'd been off route then as well! This had been confirmed by the two lads finishing Minus Two; we'd had to follow them up the exit chimneys of that route. And some time before that, of course, Gribbon's crampon had worked loose from its ancient strapping system, and that had entailed a minor retreat; Meldrum's dazzling smile had become slightly strained.

It hadn't been a great night either. We'd been in a position to get to the hut early, and were in our bunks as the first little light was seen ascending from the Fort. Sleep? Scraps of the conversation we had been forced to overhear came back to me as I stood in the cold, punctuated by the rhythmic percussion of the hut door: 'She was a most peculiar woman seemingly!'

'Oh really?'

Crash!

'... maybe I will have another, just a wee one, it helps you to sleep.'

Crash!

'Aye, Craig-y-Barns last week ... good route ... desperate ...'

'Oh! He is is He? We'd better clean this pan tonight then!'

Raucous guffaws.

'Aye, most peculiar ... she made him perform in a harness!'

Sleep after hours of this becomes impossible, and getting up a great relief.

'I think they're shouting.' At intervals we had heard words being exchanged by our partners; now their deliberations had issue. The instruction was for Phil to untie one of his ropes; the end vanished upwards, leaving us still cold and perplexed. Some grim struggle was being fought out up there, on which depended our chances of avoiding benightment, and we could only wait; we weren't even onlookers. Ice chips hissed down the slope to rattle, it seemed for ever, into the gulch below the Minus Face.

Gibbon occupied himself in putting his balaclava over thinning locks. I contemplated getting my jacket out of my sack, but the thought of fiddling with frozen ropes, removing outer layers and securing vital equipment on the glazed surface deterred me. Inertia threatened. My companion muttered darkly each time the wind blew.

Thoughts burrowed again. Where had the daylight gone?

Above the Second Platform there had been a definite mistake. I had gone left when I should have gone right, leaving my partner to lead the last pitch of Frostbite, putting still more pressure on the leg he had injured playing squash: a dangerous game that ... My penance had been to stand on a lower shelf for more than an hour as the sun set, watching and hearing, so still was the air, the footsteps of little black figures crunching down Coire Leis to warmth and supper and bed.

The witch-burners in the Hut would be alight now; wine bottles warming by the stove; the Ogre enthralled the company with *Fell Tales*: running over the mountains and gobbling up intruders into his ancient Sanctuary. ... No little figures now. Even the belated travellers on Tower Ridge had followed their torch beams along the extension to the Eastern Traverse, to disappear in Tower Gully. We were alone in a cooling world whose softened shapes and blunted forms concealed its extreme steepness and menace. I imagined looking up at N.E. Buttress from below and saw it as a monstrous Helter-Skelter. I saw us all on little fairground mats flying



round and round the stripey tower to land like breathless children at the very door of the Hut. Oh how the mind yearned towards the odorous warmth of the drying room! . . . Why so long?

At times a little cloud would cross the moon's surface. I could only hope it would be clear if our bus ever came: big and maroon and white, rumbling down Gorgie Road, full of warmth and beery breath and old men discussing the Hearts. Another little puff of wind found chinks in our armour and made us cry out against our imprisonment.

One coil detached itself from the pile at Gribbon's feet, to slip ever so leisurely down the slope; then nothing, then another. This was tortuously repeated until his one remaining rope was almost gone. He shouted. There was no reply. The rope never came taut. There were no urgent, comforting tugs, it just lay like a tired dog's tail with only an occasional twitch. No message from the beyond, only this ambivalent motion of the messenger:

'Look with what courteous action  
It wafts you to a more removed ground:  
But do not go with it.'

My face was too numb to smile, but I recalled that this was the rope which Gribbon had purchased from Meldrum for a jar of peanut butter, and I felt secretly glad that my ropes were still attached to Jacob.

Gribbon acted at last, not because there was sufficient warrant for doing so, but because further passivity was unbearable. With an economy of motion proclaiming the experience of a long life, he moved backwards and downwards from our desolate shelter, paused once on a cut step, then, with a 'See you later,' to me, and a hopeful cry to those above which lost itself in the great spaces, he moved up and out of my sight.

I looked down at my feet, encased in honest, frozen leather and tattered canvas gaiters. The boots were old friends, the feet older still, and numbness was setting in. Fifty steps, I thought, then count to 25, and then another 50. The tramping began. My sentence now included the treadmill as well as being tied to a legendary rock.

The stars were bright now: the light of each denoting a body of huge mass, of whose origin, motions and destiny I was profoundly ignorant. My life seemed miniscule and measured out in trivialities; a few climbs, a few drinks, a few books read, a few words written: sitting in armchairs thinking vaporous thoughts. The whole was like a match struck in a blind alley; it revealed nothing for a moment and then went out; one puff of wind and its smoke would be gone too. My world was contracted to what shivered below my vest and hunched its shoulders against the draughts. It was linked to other similar worlds by two strands of frozen rope. And the ropes never moved. Only my feet resumed their dreary tramping.

Speculations flitted through my tired mind like bats through a clearing. I was alone in this dreadful place . . . my companions had been phantasms . . . there was no-one on the end of the ropes . . . no-one else in this cold universe. Perhaps I had died and become immortal? This tramping on one spot was a penance for crimes on earth. But surely I was not dead? For one thing I was too uncomfortable, and for another I was too afraid.

What was I afraid of? Of Death of course! Yet, if one examined it coolly, was that the real object of fear? Not really. Not the state itself, but the process: the loss of control, the sickening slither, the cartwheel into space, the bone crushing impacts; these perhaps, and the loneliness of it. The blackness or light beyond them was not fearful.

'God is very merciful,' I muttered. It was a Mantra. I was chanting my Mantra below the Mantrap. A horrid gurgling sound, like water leaving a basin, told me I was laughing.

I jiggled it this way, I rattled it that way, I turned it upside down but it would not budge. My mitts were chopped to shreds and my hands belonged to somebody else. The unknown powers smiled on the folly of my actions. This particle of warmth feebly struggling to get free from the rock to which, an instant before, it had clipped itself. But the struggles continued until krab and sling were in my hands. And then I dropped them, and they slid, ever so gently, out of sight.

The universe, after all, contained some other agency. The ropes were tightening inexorably. A moment ago I'd had too much time, now I had too little. The unseen agent might have forgotten that, before he could encourage me by pulling on the rope, I had to climb at first downwards; a pull at this stage was not what I wanted. It became a race backwards down the polished curvature; legs shaking, wooden hands prodding picks for balance, shuddering inwardly, I just made it.

We had climbed all day on abundant thick ice. The paradox of the Corner was that its covering was vanishingly thin. Steep rock smeared with glass. As I came to it in the moonlight I found signs of the great struggle. A deadman at the bottom grinned like a skull in the desert; it was half embedded and had been left as a runner. A few feet up the corner some shallow scrapes had been hacked in the smears, and an ice-screw protruded, rather too much, from its placement. I could only pick up the pieces and wonder.

Blue sparks shot out as my picks repeatedly struck rock. I bridged and heaved, pulled on shaky axes, scraped, scratched and gritted my way upwards. As my body came back to life, a fierce exhilaration swept through me. Just as every means of continued upward progress ran out, and it seemed as if my feet must lose contact with the rock, a long flailing reach with the hammer brought the security of perfect névé and a moment of knowledge and peace. My hand tightened round the shaft and one last convulsive heave took me over the top.



As I crouched, spent, on the slope above the Corner, a boulder-like shape stirred and a familiar Irish accent offered comfort:

'Well done, now! That deserves a biscuit! Just let me get my headlamp out of this bag . . . But wait now, this isn't a headlamp . . . it's . . . a piece of cake!'

A little farther up the ridge I encountered the good shepherd, Jacob, looking as drawn as I've ever seen him. Despite his injured leg he had led his little flock to salvation. At his wise insistence we followed him to the Summit Shelter. The wind was rising and our faces were stung by drift. Meldrum produced an orange and unselfishly quartered it; I can taste the juice yet.

Down in the hut all was snoring tranquillity. The Ogre, betraying a heart of gold, had put a pan of soup on the stove for us, and Sandy Reid got up to make us tea. One remembers these things.

Time was still out of joint next morning. Dave produced a bottle of wine and we had dinner for breakfast. Outside, the gentle elements of last night had fled, and even the young bloods of the SMC came back, snow-bespattered, from the entrance to Coire na Ciste. Someone asked why we had taken so long. The Ogre himself pronounced a kindly absolution.

'You see,' he said, 'they were using old-fashioned equipment.' But we knew that the tumbling grains had qualified our proceedings in more than one way. Yesterday, it seemed, had occurred at just the right time.



## CHANCE ENCOUNTERS OF A FLEETING KIND

By Bill Shipway

A CENTURY ago a member of the SMC wrote that members of the club might be divided into two classes: the Ultramontanes (deeds of derring-do) and the Salvationists (safety first). Subsequently, this distinction<sup>1</sup> has been suggested to be false – many early members exhibited both tendencies. Nevertheless, the labels survive in story and verse 100 years later.

Talking about it not long ago, a friend asked me what groups I would put hillgoers into nowadays. That will not be difficult, I thought, and began to make some notes of stravaigers I had encountered over the years. But the task was more awkward than I had imagined. The strong, silent men, yes, they were self-reliant and knowledgeable, even if having rather much of the loner in their make-up. But the blethers were by no means a bunch of softies. Some were beyond doubt princes of the hills, brightening the day with warm friendship. In between, a collection of gangrels interested in the experiences of others, ready to help with the route, or tell you of a better B & B down the road. There is only one thing to do, dear reader – turn the question over to you, and give you my notes to add to your own. Send entries to the Editor to reach him by December 31. A mystery prize for the first correct solution opened.

A year or two back on a breezy July morning, I set off for Beinn Dearg of Atholl from Old Blair. The route is served by good estate roads and it was not long before I reached Allt Sheicheachan bothy, all spick and span with table, forms and chairs in place but no-one about. After leaving the burn the path follows a long shoulder to the cairn, rather a cold tramp now against a bleak wind blowing strongly, making the dyke at the trig point a welcome shelter. To the north, waves of featureless brown crests led one's eyes to the Cairngorms. Towards the Gaick deer forest in the west the empty landscape was much the same. The wind at the cairn never let up and I was glad to think I would have it behind me on the return journey. As I left the summit rocks my eye caught a solitary figure crossing the peat moss from the west on what I guessed was the route in from Calvine and Bruar Lodge. Here was a chance to exchange greetings with a fellow walker and add to one's information about the hill. I altered direction to intercept him. But the focus of my attention only called: 'Blow, in't it?' and passed on without slackening his stride. Clearly, a man saving his breath for better things. Or was he one of those 'head down get to the top as fast as possible and on to the next Munro' types that one meets occasionally these days?

In June 1992 I spent a week on Skye. Sandy had only six Munros left to climb to compleat the round, five on the Cuillin Ridge, plus Blaven. The weather was good and on our first day we climbed Sgurr nan Eag and Sgurr

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<sup>1</sup> See R.N. Campbell in SMCI, XXXIV, p. 219.

Dubh Mor; on our second day the Inn Pin followed by Sgurr Mhic Choinnich. We then took a day off and paid our respects at the last resting place of John Mackenzie and Norman Collie at Struan. The weather held and next day we returned to the Ridge for Am Basteir.

That left Friday for Blaven, and again it was a fine morning. I had been up this hill before, knew it would not present any difficulty, and donned my kilt as glad rags for the big occasion. Sandy was not quite as exuberant. Now retired, he had climbed his first Munro as a schoolboy, and was finding it hard to believe he was about to be translated from a common Munro-bagger to the aristocracy of the Compleat Munroists.

Loch Slapin sparkled in the sun, Blaven looked magnificent and we set off up the Allt na Dunaiche with lightsome step, passing some faithful members of the John Muir Trust at work on the path. It was sun hat and shirt sleeves down here, but some three hours later we were glad of anorak and woollies as we crossed the final slope to the cairn and trig point. Bravo for Sandy, he had finished the round, and as befits a couple of pensioners we celebrated with a sip of Drambuie. Other walkers came across from the South Top and helped with the obligatory photographs. It was sunny and clear in the keen wind and the views of the Cuillin Ridge and the Red Hills were superb.

We had just left the cairn to begin the descent when we met three climbers coming up. They had made the climb via Clach Glas and had left their sacs where the gully comes in at the Great Prow. Perhaps the Drambuie had loosened my tongue. I had to tell them of Sandy compleating. 'Wow!' their leader exclaimed: 'I finished myself last year and you are the first man I've met who has done the same.' He congratulated Sandy with enthusiasm and sounded as thrilled as we were ourselves. We learned that his name was Matthew and that Clach Glas was a warm up for a visit to the Cioch next day.

Gladdened by this encounter we left our three friends to finish their climb and continued downwards ourselves. The coire was warm in the afternoon sun and we paused for a breather by the side of the track above the little meadow on the coire floor. Suddenly, there was a clatter of stones behind us. It was Matthew and his two friends again. He pulled a bottle of Johnnie Walker from his sac. 'We can't let this pass without a toast, have a dram!' Then the three stalwarts hastened on down, but Matthew told the tale ahead of us to others on the path, so that Sandy's progress was marked by even more handshakes. A man of good cheer, charismatic, friendly – meeting Matthew made a great day even more memorable.

Mountain guides are not a corps I've had much to do with, and I suppose like other professionals they have to be economical with information in order to safeguard their livelihood. Not long ago I was in a party making its way along the Cuillin Ridge from Sgurr Mhic Choinnich to Sgurr Thearlaich. After leaving the airy crest of Mhic Choinnich we trod gingerly

over the slabby roofs and then crept across the face of the hill toward the bealach below the tumbled rocks leading to the upper ramparts of Thearlaich. Here we paused and I asked our leader: 'When do we reach Collie's Ledge?' He turned round and, in a voice that told me all too clearly that some mothers do have 'em, replied: 'Collie's Ledge? You've just come down it!'

Another meeting I am less happy about recounting occurred back in August 1977 when a few of us decided to attempt Ben Nevis, Carn Mor Dearg and the Aonachs Mor and Beag in one day. We left the Glen Nevis camp-site at 7.30a.m. and made our way up the pony track on a glorious summer morning to reach the summit plateau of the Ben at 11a.m. The view was almost too much to take in, a wonderful panorama of peaks and ridges, with gleams of light from lochs and sea. Then it was on across the plateau to find the descent to the curving Arete, with its bouldery spine leading towards the pink screes of Carn Mor Dearg. After threading the ragged switchback above Coire Leis and a halt for lunch, we reached the cairn on Carn Mor Dearg at 2p.m. This time it was not the distant hills which held the eye, but the towering cliffs of Nevis across the glen. When mantled in mist and snow they present a fearsome aspect, but today they were smiling and peaceful in the sun, with only a few scattered patches of snow to remind one of their mighty winter couloirs.

It was time now to turn round and descend from Carn Mor Dearg by its east ridge to a grassy bealach where we filled our water bottles from the first trickle of a burn. A steep grassy wall split by crags faced us, demanding many a grunt and gasp ere the angle relented and we found ourselves on the broad back of the Aonachs. Dumping our sacs we walked up the wide expanse and reached the cairn on Aonach Mor at 5p.m., there to have an argument as to whether we were looking across the Mamores to the Aonach Eagach or to Bidean nam Bian.

Then back to retrieve the sacs and head for the short craggy path leading up to the summit dome of Aonach Beag. Oddly, the ground underfoot was mossy and tundra-like, differing from the grassy sweeps of its neighbours close by. We sprawled around the cairn discussing the distances still to cover. It would seem three miles down Glen Nevis from Steall to road end, and thereafter perhaps four on the road to the camp-site . . . but first we must reach Steall.

Leaving the cairn at 6.30p.m. we began the downward journey, picking our way among the outcrops, down and still down. Suddenly Ronnie fetches us up, pointing to a lone figure descending the Allt Coire Guisachan towards Steall, a long way below us. 'If he had a car at the road-end and were going down Glen Nevis . . .'

Hastening down we reach a pool on the burn and await the approach of the walker. No elaborately accoutred climber this man, just baggy flannel trousers, a cotton shirt and an ancient canvas rucksack. We hail him as



though we have no other motive but the honest friendship of the hills, fall in beside him with chat about this and that, trying to conceal the high stakes for which we are playing. Ah, the deceit in the heart of man. At last Alex takes the bull by the horns. 'Are you staying in Fort William?' Five pairs of ears strain for his reply. 'No, I'm camping at Steall . . .' Ouch, no car, no lift. Immediately, all interest in our erstwhile friend departs, and we are as keen to extricate ourselves as we were to ingratiate ourselves minutes before. We slip away with as much grace as we can muster and hasten on down the burn towards Steall, the Nevis gorge and the road-end. Happily, there were still folk about when we reached the road-end in the gloaming, and we were lifted in more than one car before we had walked as far as Polldubh. So ended a great mountain day.

Let's pass now to the Fannichs. Stewart and I thought we would have a try for Beinn Liath Mhor and drove to the parking place on the A835 at the west end of Loch Glascarnoch. Another two walkers, man and woman, were kitting up by their car and said they were going for Am Faochagach, on the north side of the road. I said we were hoping to go there ourselves on the following day, and asked them where they intended to cross the Abhainn a' Gharbhrain, a river said to involve wet feet even in normal conditions. They joked about it, the man saying we would see the tide marks on his breeches when they got back. With that they were across the road and away.

It was a surly kind of late summer morning, blowy and overcast, difficult to say how the day would turn out. The route for Beinn Liath Mhor was simple and about two hours later we reached the col below the long curving ridge leading to the summit. We started up, the mist blowing round us, the ground stony and shattered. The Dears were clear – it is strange how weather patterns can be different over relatively short distances. We reached the double cairn and sat down for some lunch.

Stewart thought he would like to return. I was keen to reach Sgurr Mor, so we agreed to separate. It was fairly rough walking over the wet scree, easy to slip, and I had not given it more than a few minutes before I began thinking I had done a very foolish thing in not staying together in the mist. I turned and set a bearing to contour the hill and rejoin our route of the morning. Some minutes later I was surprised to see a figure loom out of the mist, compass in hand. 'Have you passed a man going down?' I asked. 'No, I haven't seen anybody.' I was filled with alarm, but mercifully when clear of the mist I saw Stewart below me. Such episodes teach lessons.

Lower down there was a blink of sun, though behind us the ridge remained cloud-capped, dense and gloomy. As we approached the parking place, I was sorry to see that the other car was no longer there. Unlocking the car, I noticed a sheet of paper with a message on it tucked under the wiper blade. I have kept the paper with my log of the day. Here is what it said: 'Re ascent of Am Faochagach: For your information, it is possible to

cross the Abhainn a' Gharbhrain without getting your feet wet! The location is GR282753 where the river splits into two. The SW branch is easy to cross and the NE branch can be crossed where it is split by a small grassy island. There is a small cairn on the far bank. Good walking! Hope you had a good day. From the couple you met this morning.'

Who says you do not meet some wonderful folk in the hills?

My last story concerns a visit to Ben Alder. Marcus had arranged with the estate that we might have the use of the bothy at Black Burn of Pattack for two nights. Permission to take our car up had been refused and we were faced with a six-mile walk from Gallovie. None of us had any experience of back-packing: we found the heavy packs very different from our usual day sacs, and were mighty glad to throw them down at the wooden bothy, light the fire and have some supper. The messages on the walls went back to 1913 and some were quite funny e.g. 'This would be a nice place to die in'. But as we sat round the fire we would not have exchanged our bothy for Buckingham Palace.

We had only just rolled out our sleeping bags when there was the sound of a car outside and a solitary man came in. He sounded friendly and quickly made himself at home.

We awoke to a perfect June morning: even at 7a.m. the sun was warm. We left in high spirits for the round of Ben Alder and Bheoil – the early sun in a clear sky, a skylark singing, a good path underfoot and our mountain ahead, its massive flanks still streaked with snows of winter. Bill from Aberdeen, the stranger of the night before, had departed ahead of us, but as we made our approach by the Long Leachas he appeared in silhouette on the Short Leachas, stepping up the ridge with the easy stride of a hillman. Taking a breather near the cairn, we saw him coming towards us: 'I've run out of film, would you have a spare?' 'Haven't a spare', said Alex, 'but if it's slides you need maybe I could take some shots for you!' That seemed to solve the problem and he joined us for the remainder of the day.

Our new friend was a grand companion. He had a marvellous knowledge of the mountains, and of those who climbed them, and of the books written about them, all recounted in an unselfconscious fashion which assumed we knew as much as he did. He pointed out that the retreating snowfields delineated the coires and ridges in a way which made the hills particularly lovely at that time of year. 'See this boulder', he would say 'It's granite, while the rocks of this hill are schistose. It's been carried from the Moor of Rannoch in the Ice Age and deposited here.' He took a lizard from a rock by the burn and showed us its beautiful markings, did the same with wild flowers and mosses.

Back at the bothy he pulled a bottle from his sac. 'Have a drink on me, this is home-brewed red wine.' We had a wonderful evening of talk and laughter round the fire. Our shadows danced on the walls as the logs crackled and flared, and he talked of ice climbs on Lochnagar, and the



hazards of the Aonach Eagach, and mountain rescue, and training young people, and the friendship of climbing companions whose names we knew, and half a hundred other things. Even the deer came to listen, for later we found a hind at the bothy window, and others grazing nearby. The warmth of friendship matched the warmth of the hearth and when it was time to get into our sleeping bags again we could not think of when we had spent a happier evening.

Next day we decided to visit the Laggan hills before returning. Our new friend offered to take our packs down to Gallovie in his car – that was a real bonus. He was not coming out with us, so we took some last photos and said our goodbyes. ‘I’m B– B–’, he said: ‘Look me up if you are ever in Aberdeen.’

These are a sample of the chance meetings which have come to me over years given to hillwalking. For me such encounters enrich an outing, and their recollection sings in the memory for many a year. Perhaps not everyone is of the same opinion: perhaps you prefer your own company. And as for classifying hillgoers into groups, I’ll have to admit they are as different as individuals as the folks walking in Princes Street or George Square.

## REFLECTIONS

For W.H. Murray

His writings brought the mountains alive for me  
his exploits in ice-choked gullies on Buachaille and Ben  
inspired generations to dare and to know  
the steep and challenging places.

This morning our eyes met through an hotel window  
as I strode to the mountains and I saw reflections,  
reflections on comrades lost in war, reflections on past glories  
and above all reflections on the physical limitations of age.

*Charlie Orr  
Alexandra Hotel, Fort William.  
4th December, 1994.*

## THE CONNOISSEURS' ROUTE

By Peter Warburton

I HAVE never been on friendly terms with an ice axe. Even corks carefully affixed to the spike fall off – unobserved. This can make for unpopularity on buses and aeroplanes. Some people do so over-react. What principally undid me were those illustrations of climbers toppling backwards, forwards or sideways down steep slopes but saving themselves by deft manipulation of an axe on which adversity has not loosened their grip. There could be no more vivid reminder of my own lack of prowess in similar dire circumstances. I dismissed out of hand, as imprudent in the extreme, the advice that beginners gain practical experience of 'self arrest' by voluntarily hurling themselves down suitable slopes. So, where the high hills are concerned, I became a May to October excursionist. Snow and ice are best admired in other peoples' photographs.

One of the benefits this heresy confers is the increased time made available for one of winter's safer pleasures – the study, purposeful or otherwise, of maps. The awkward squad find perverse delight in devising approach routes that, usually for excellent reasons, have escaped the notice of the corps of mountain guide writers. When I feel able to keep a straight face, I am apt to refer airily to such discoveries as connoisseurs' routes.

There are also connoisseurs' addresses to be found on the Highland sheets – remote habitations that fascinate by their isolation or because of the evocative quality of a name. Visiting them can become as much a mission as collecting Munros. The reality often falls short of expectations. Marble Lodge, although built of the specified material, is still rather a let-down if the picture in the mind's eye has featured one or more stately pleasure domes. Iron Lodge – another estate workers' dwelling in character – is definitely fraudulent in its present incarnation. I fear that Abyssinia, held in reserve as a suitable outing for my declining years, will also disappoint. Wag and Glut are others that hint at more than they are likely to deliver.

Some sites stir the imagination whatever the weather – Bachnagairn is a good example – but judgments are inevitably coloured by conditions on the day. Altanour Lodge (ruin) on the late afternoon of a very wet October

day with darkness falling, five sodden miles ahead to Inverey and soaked breeches chafing inside thighs at every step: the verdict was unfavourable. In contrast, I have always been lucky with Slugain Lodge (ruin). The approach up a lightly-wooded, nicely watered ravine, with a resident population of woodland birds, twittering incongruously in a high moorland setting is rather special. There is even a Slugain bypass from which you can look down on the ruins and speculate on the logistics of supply in the days when it was in use. In fact, many of the remoter sporting lodges had a brief and limited active life. McConnochie, writing a hundred years ago, notes that Altanour and Loch Builg Lodges were only in occasional seasonal occupation.

One place that long eluded me is Patt, or rather Patt Lodge, since the keeper's house at Patt went under when Loch Monar was enlarged. There are few references in the literature. Brenda Macrow writes of Iron Lodge and she and Tom Weir of Benula Lodge (a casualty of the Mullardoch dam), Hamish Brown and Iain Thomson are informative about Maol Buidhe, but Patt Lodge seems quite off the literary beat. Thomson who lived (1956-60) at Strathmore, now submerged, on the northern shore of the loch writes of his friends and neighbours, the keeper and family at Patt, but the Lodge hardly enters the narrative, although he includes an undated photograph. On my maps it remained safely above the new water line, still sheltered by several acres of woodland. This was not conclusive evidence. Corndavon Lodge has lost its plantation and Cabuie is no more, despite having survived the raising of Loch Fannich. Eventually, I shall become reconciled to metric maps, but not yet. There is something to be said for the possibility of imperial surprise.

A day devoted solely to the Patt experience would have been extravagant of holiday time, especially as it might well end in contemplation of a few stones in a clearing among tree stumps. You need not be of the romantic 'rickle ae stanes' school to feel melancholy on such occasions. The map suggested a solution: a return visit to Lurg Mhor by way of Meall Mor, starting from the east end of Loch Monar would take in Patt en-route, providing a second objective for the day as well as promising a potential connoisseurs' route. My only previous outing to Lurg Mhor had been by the conventional approach from Strathcarron over Beinn Tharsuinn and Bidein a'Choire Sheasgach, but I had so run out of steam and time that Meall Mor had proved a top too far. Instead, I had cut down to the head of Loch Monar and up to the Bealach Bhearnais (a genuine connoisseurs' short cut, this). Later, I had been slightly affronted to read that the Gilbertian tough guys do not consider that these hills offer a notably Big, Classic, Wild or even Challenging walk.

At one time access by car to Glen Strathfarrar involved considerable ceremony. The applicant presented himself, not at the Big House, but at a substantial subsidiary establishment where a lady of military manner,

seated at an imposing desk, inquired his motives and completed the paperwork. Those intending a round of the Strathfarrar Munros would be handed a Struy Estate day pass giving permission to visit Glen Strathfarrar 'for the purpose of sightseeing'. Such preliminaries were time consuming, but the pass allowed 13 hours (8.30a.m. to 9.30p.m.) in the glen. In 1989 time was saved by collecting a pass from the gatekeeper, but it only gave a 10-hour licence, which must have caused unease to many another late breakfaster. A more welcome change was the omission of the Estate pass footnote which had read: 'The Private Road to Monar Lodge and across the top of the Hydro Electric Board Dam are out of bounds to Visitors.'

A wink being as good as a nod, I drove across the dam, hoping that no frolicsome keeper would padlock the gate during the day. In Gleann Innis an Loichel two parked cars offered qualified reassurance on that point. The first stage of the walking route was a 500ft climb to a bealach at 1250ft between Meallan Odhar and Beinn Dubh. A promising path left the glen but quickly faded, leaving me high-stepping through primeval heather mixture. The col was wide and wet, inadequately drained by slow moving, meandering streams broad out of all proportion to their flow. The going looked better on the far bank, but never was. After some long time I was granted a possible distant sighting of the Patt plantation, only to be denied confirmation by a combination of drifting mist and minor undulations not recorded on the map. This process was several times repeated, raising in the explorer's mind the subject of mirages. I encouraged my steps with the notion that perhaps I was trampling heather that not even stout Butterfield had trod before: only wild surmise of course. One who certainly came this way was the Rev. A. E. Robertson. He notes that the path fades away at the bealach but that it was 'fair going' down to Aultfearn, which stood by the loch shore about 1½ miles east of the keeper's house and the jetty at Patt. His photographs suggest that muir burning was practised at that time (1903).

Having cautiously negotiated the Riabhachan burn, which was carrying a lot of snow water, I made directly for Meall Mor, by then in full view, intending to hold Patt in reserve for the return journey. A mistake, since the next burn was unfordable and I was obliged to follow it downstream to a bridge close by the Lodge. Behind protective fencing a cultivated plot was visible and, looking up, I could see the windows of a habitable, probably an inhabited house.

Over the bridge the going gradually improved and, after what had gone before, the 2400ft climb of the Meall Mor ridge was a pleasant change. At the top however there was one of those irritating winds that seems to come from all directions and calls for so many precautionary measures that it is impossible to relax with the flask and sandwiches. The convenient rock seat is in the full blast. Nicely established in the second best situation, you find that your arrival has coincided with the briefest lull in the gale. The final resting place, 50ft below the summit, proves very wet, a fact not

initially apparent. In these distressing circumstances, I reminded myself of a typically rueful aside of Stevie Smith that seemed obliquely relevant: 'I will say this about Shrimpton-on-Strand, you can always get out of the wind one side of the breakwater or the other, or under the bathing machine.' Then, as there was no one about, I declaimed the even more appropriate lines of Victor Hugo:

*'Le vent qui vient a travers les montagnes  
Me rendra fou'.*

Meall Mor, intermittently visible during the meal, presented a striking picture. It had attracted a wreath of bluish black cloud of the sort that usually crosses the sky slowly and in bulk, but these were mere fragments and they were circling the summit rocks at a smart pace against a fiery background of filtered sunlight. It had all the look of a stage set. I should not have been in the least surprised to find fat Brunnhilde up there awaiting the arrival of thick-witted Siegfried.

Only about half-a-mile of ridge with an intervening drop of 200ft separates Meall Mor (3190ft) from Lurg Mhor (3234ft). I reckoned, first, that Naismith, a more energetic man, would have allowed no more than 40 minutes for the return trip and, second, that I was already that much behind a schedule that would get me out of the glen by the prescribed deadline. These calculations took time. Another consideration was that the oasis of Patt might prove to be one of those places where the householder, esteeming his rarity value, presses a cup of tea and conversation on the passing traveller. Time should be allowed to accommodate that possibility. It would have been a different matter if Mozart or Verdi were involved, but Wagner is not a favourite: in the circumstances I decided not to intrude. Incidentally, the preoccupation with timekeeping was occasioned by reports, perhaps ill-founded, that the glen authorities were inclined to be difficult with late arrivals.

The only feasible route from the bridge at Patt lay through the policies, along a drive between gardens and loch. There was no visible sign of life in or about the Lodge, but everything looked solid and serene. Every prospect pleased, even the raising of the water level from 663ft to 740ft appeared to have enhanced the outlook, at least when the loch is full. Patt Lodge evidently belonged with the minority that had lived up to every hope.

This glowing citation was interrupted by the loud, excited barking of a pack of dogs. A bend in the drive revealed kennels on a knoll to the left and on the right a modern bungalow. A man, alerted by the noise, had come out in anticipation of developments and was standing, back to the track, ostensibly studying the pile of logs stacked against the bungalow wall. I



called a greeting. He turned, stared fully long enough to leave no doubt that the snub was deliberate, then, without change of expression, resumed his contemplation of the wood stack. He had no words for his dogs either and they, keenly regretting their confinement, voiced their frustration with redoubled fervour. They were not the bald, athletic type – all teeth and chest and genitalia – these were hairy brutes, but big and their bark had a serious baritone quality. Perhaps they were only well-intentioned, friendly doggies, but I was rather glad that Pattman had not thrown them a key.

I re-entered the 'here be dragons' country without enthusiasm. In fact there was little wildlife: just the occasional covey of vultures and the odd yeti. I suppose the well organised travel between Patt and Gleann Innis an Loichel by boat, if at all. By land there does not seem to be any right or wrong way and consequently little advantage to be gained from limited previous experience. I did avoid some of the minor misjudgments of the morning, but without striking a significantly better line. A planned detour to Carn na Cosaig to see whether anything remained of the deer watcher's cottage mentioned by Robertson and Thomson was abandoned without remorse. This desirable residence was put up by Winans, the celebrated high-spending and notoriously litigious shooting tenant of the 1880s. Hot and fractious, I negotiated the wetlands of the bealach to see below a small party variously loping and trotting along the track from the direction of Sgurr na Lapaich towards the parked cars. They conveyed an infectious air of urgency. I caught the mood, but was unable to emulate the action. Lurching as briskly as possible down the slope, I had a grandstand view of the admirable speed with which they divested themselves of rucksacks, boots and outer clothing and made a dashing getaway, leaving twin dust trails.

Installed in my own driving seat with every window open, clothes gradually came unstuck from body and spirits rose. An unexpected lorry progressing ponderously down the glen allowed me to catch up and join the convoy. At the checkpoint a leader of men emerged from the middle car to make a joint presentation of three passes with all our apologies for having slightly overstayed our welcome. He was evidently well received. As we drove through the gate, the lady with the keys acknowledged our further thanks with a friendly smile.

Not a bad day at all really, although I reserve the right, if anyone should ever talk to me about the heathery horror of Lochan Fada (north), to take up quarter-of-an-hour of their time with a full account of the hell of Loch Monar (south).



## FLIGHT OF THE CONDOR

By John Ashbridge

*An account of the first ascent of the Flight of the Condor, Grade VI, 5, Indicator Wall, Ben Nevis.*

THE ROUTE was going well until Robin Clothier popped his head over the arete I had just negotiated with some difficulty.

He inquired: 'You doing the traverse?' 'Yeah,' I replied, concentrating on traversing away across the ice banked ramp. 'You with Simon?' he persisted.

I couldn't deny it. Simon Richardson was belayed some distance away over a series of aretes and bulges. He had guessed that Robin had been below us on Riders of the Storm and had suspected he might catch us up.

'Hello Simon,' hollered Robin

From that moment, things started going wrong.

After a long winter season, that last route is always difficult to predict in advance. So often, end-of-season days can be wasted by poor conditions brought on by prevailing warm westerly winds. April routes, high on Ben Nevis can however often prove an exception, for that extra 1000ft can hold good ice and névé when the surrounding hills are touched by the first taste of spring.

We had reports of good ice from the previous weekend and it had remained cold all week. Simon had called me at work on the Thursday, tentatively suggesting a visit to the Ben. He was writing the new SMC guidebook to the mountain and had his eye on an unclimbed line. I had half arranged a cragging trip to the Lakes, but the northern England weather had been pretty wet all week and the weekend forecast was for much of the same. It didn't take much to cancel the trip to England.

We arranged to meet at 4a.m. in Inverurie, a small Aberdeenshire town, for the drive across to Fort William. Since moving to Scotland, early rises and long drives along windy Highland roads have become an almost ritualistic feature of my winter climbing experiences. Two-and-a-half hour's later we arrived at the golf course car park. A few other climbers were stirring into life as we sorted our gear.

'Do you want to see the line?' Simon produced a glossy A4 print of Indicator Wall, captured on one of those rare sunny Ben days. A rising traverse-line was obvious from the angle of the photograph, the ground above barred by a steep, overhanging headwall, and below by a vertical wall of corners and aretes.

'Looks a good line, a natural weakness,' I said. But would it go? What grade would it be?

I have only ever really enjoyed the walk up the Allt a' Mhuilinn on the very rare occasions when the peat bog is frozen and the footpath can be

negotiated with ease. Normally, as on this occasion, the path is at its boot-sucking worst. At least it wasn't raining. We chatted idly and made steady progress, even pulling ahead of a party, and the CIC hut arrived sooner than I had anticipated. Perhaps the previous five months of carting heavy sacs around numerous Scottish glens and mountains had paid off and I was getting fit.

The ground was still not frozen when we reached the first snow at the base of Observatory Gully. Avalanche debris had piled up as contorted mounds of ice blocks in a huge fan. At least the cornices wouldn't be that unfriendly, they were lying in front of us. While gearing up, a party from the CIC Hut caught up. They were friends of Simon and we talked for a while and arranged to meet at the hut that evening, before leaving them to their preparations for Point Five.

The climb up to Indicator Wall is a long slog. It is 2000ft up Observatory Gully beneath the imposing Observatory Buttress, to the highest cliff in Britain. With its base at 4000ft, the Wall took its name from the viewpoint indicator erected by the SMC on the plateau above the wall in 1927 (and destroyed by vandals in 1942).

The Observatory Gully snow was mercifully hard-packed, with wide swathes having been compressed by the tracks of numerous avalanches. We entered the mists and remained immersed throughout the day. Beneath Gardyloo Gully, the snow steepened considerably, and a careful traverse was required above a steep rocky buttress beneath the Wall.

In the swirling cloud, Simon found the start of the line and was digging out a belay as I arrived. It took some time to get ourselves sorted out as decent belays always seem to be a problem with Ben Nevis andesite. This one had to be good as we were climbing into unknown ground.

'I'll take this first pitch, it's crucial we find the ramp line.'

'Fine, you've got the photo,' I replied.

He led off, up and rightwards across a series of ice falls towards more mixed ground and was fixing the first runner as another team arrived. They were surprised by our line, until I explained who I was with. Scottish winter climbing is a small world.

Simon reached the mixed ground, disappeared out of sight and was soon belayed. I moved off to join him. Traversing across steep icy ground has always unnerved me and it took a while to feel comfortable. I felt rusty and uneasy for the first 50ft, and tried to relax at the first runner. Moving onto rockier ground I felt more at ease, and was happier by the time I pulled over the small spike that required an 'à cheval' approach.

'How are you feeling?' Simon inquired, perhaps sensing my unease at the start of the icy traverse. 'Yeah, OK, fine now,' I replied.

The second pitch involved a short corner with rotten ice at its base but good *névé* over the top. I planted the axes deep and heaved up and away from the belay onto easier ground and traversed up and right to a belay below the third pitch of Albatross.

The route was going well. I could see the third pitch clearly now and the ramp line we had seen on the photograph was to my right.

'I reckon that's Clothier beneath us on Riders of the Storm,' Simon remarked as he arrived at the belay. An old climbing partnership and now joint guidebook writers, Simon and Robin revel in friendly rivalry about new routes and their subsequent grades, especially on the Ben. This route was no exception.

'Give him a hard time if he tries to overtake,' joked Simon as he moved quickly off on the ramp-line proper. It looked straightforward, and was. He quickly covered the 130ft to a hidden belay beneath the imposing headwall. I moved off to join him. The snow was in excellent condition and allowed for rapid progress. I was enjoying the climbing immensely and my initial trepidation about traversing had dissipated.

It was difficult to ignore Robin's forceful questioning, especially as I was concentrating on staying upright on the traverse. When it became clear who I was climbing with, Robin did as Simon had predicted by abandoning Riders of the Storm, and following us across the ramp-line. I subconsciously speeded up my movements to keep ahead of him. Who ever said climbing isn't competitive.

Quickly, I joined Simon, who had managed to find an excellent three-point belay, much to my relief, as the ground ahead of us looked more difficult. A delicate technical axe-torquing move across a thinly-iced buttress got me onto easier ground. I left Simon and Robin to their jovial banter and continued traversing across and upwards over thinly-iced ramps and walls until the traverse ended beneath an overhang, with the ramp tumbling away in a series of corners and aretes. I belayed to a rather loose looking block to the left of Stormy Petrel and brought Simon across. The gear and belay were poor, and as Simon moved off, I could still hear the nattering as I started bringing in the rope. Suddenly, a gasp of alarm and the rope twanged tight. The jovial banter stopped. On the delicate icy buttress one of Simon's axes had pulled, depositing him back at the belay. He tried again, and soon arrived at the stance.

'My axe pulled.'

'I noticed, that move needed a bit of concentration, you should have stopped chatting to Clothier,' I jested.

The atmosphere had become more relaxed since Robin had appeared but the route had become more challenging and required more concentration. Simon's ebullient mood continued as he considered the next pitch.

'Do you reckon it'll go?' I asked. 'Yeah, no problem,' was the confident reply. Gear exchanged he moved off, directly upwards over two thinly-iced bulges to a steep, icicle-draped chimney.

There ensued a waiting game. I suspected the chimney would be desperate and as I got colder and more battered by falling ice, my suspicions were confirmed. Simon couldn't find any gear and in the process had removed most of the ice.

'I can't do this, so I'm traversing right,' he yelled from above. I was relieved, mainly because of the reduction in the pounding I had been getting on the very exposed belay. The rope moved out faster now. Thankfully, the verbal barrage between Simon and Robin had also ceased as they concentrated on the climbing. Meanwhile, Robin had led a very steep icy corner cutting through the overhanging headwall to our left.

'I'll call this the Mickey Mouse finish,' he whooped as he pulled over the final bulge.

I joined Simon at a drive-in and peg belay beneath a steep, rotten icefall, 40ft beneath the easy summit snow slopes. I collected the gear and led off. The rotten ice was soon passed and I planted the axes into good *névé*. Something felt wrong, my right boot just didn't seem to be holding firm. I looked down and saw the crampon hanging off the boot. Time just stopped; 10ft above a poor belay, 300ft up Indicator Wall, and 4000ft up Ben Nevis my crampon had come off.

'How're your axes?' asked an alarmed Simon.

'Good, good,' I panted. I tried desperately to firm up the left boot placement as I hung off the tools. I had to get back to the belay quickly, before my arms gave up. I took my weight on my left side and threaded a tape through the unweighted hammer wrist loop. Groaning, left arm pumping, I struggled to get the tape through the frozen loop. Mind racing, arms failing, I clipped a cow's tail to the axe and took the weight off my arms. Through! I clipped the ropes. Relieved, panic subsiding, I lowered down to the belay, the hammer wiggling ominously as the frozen ropes jerked through the crab. I was down.

'Jesus, that's the second time I've lost a step-in leading a pitch this winter,' I said, panic receding from my voice. The front bail had sprung off its mount, on the current set, a different pair from the earlier incident in which the same failure occurred at the top of the ice fall on West Gully, Lochnagar. I suppose practice makes perfect. Simon led the pitch without further incident. My hammer, to which we had trusted our lives, alarmingly, just lifted out of its placement. With my crampon temporarily repaired, I gingerly cleared the icefall. I negotiated the snow slope and awkward cornice. Robin and his partner, Jim McGimpsey, were chatting to Simon.

'What took you so long?' Robin yelled, grinning.

Lost for words, I muttered something about step-in crampons and joined in the rope coiling. My elation at climbing a hard new route on the Ben was tempered by the experience of life-threatening gear failure. I tried to push the thoughts of the consequences of falling from the icefall out of my mind as we descended to the CIC Hut. A cup of coffee in the steamy warmth of the hut soon cleared my depressive thoughts, a process helped by the genial atmosphere among the climbers recounting their exploits at the end of a memorable day.

Later, in the darkness of the Allt a' Mhuilinn, I promised myself a new pair of crampons, with straps!



## THE DREADFUL BUSINESS OF THE ABERNETTY BROTHERS

Edited by Robin N. Campbell

*from the case notes of John H. Watson, M.D.<sup>1</sup>*

I WAS summoned out of my reverie by a tap on the knee. I stared down at Holmes's long bony finger, then into his cool grey eyes.

'Watson,' he said, 'I will come with you to Skye.'

'But how could you imagine that I wish to go there?' I exclaimed.

Holmes lounged back into his old chair, propped his feet on the coal scuttle and released a thick coil of smoke. He grinned through the fog like the Cheshire Cat.

'Really, Watson. This secrecy regarding your summer holidays in Scotland is wholly preposterous. Do you presume to try to deceive me? You have spent an hour this evening delving in *Thomas's handbook of the Bowe*<sup>2</sup>. I have noted that you consult this work each Spring, when you plan your holiday. Of course it is not Thomas's tedious monograph which you have been reading. It is a copy of *Munro's Tables of Scottish Mountains*, which you have glued into the case of a surplus Thomas in the hope of concealing your vice from me. A feeble stratagem, indeed! You then proceeded to massage your old war-wound and to peer anxiously at that picture.' He waved his calabash at the picture of the rocky Reichenbach Falls above the mantel. 'Next, after much head-scratching, you gazed at me speculatively and began the agitated ruminations that accompany the flaming of an awkward request'.

'Plainly you had decided that you must *bag* the difficult Skye peaks before your bad leg entirely refuses to bend. You doubted whether the dull Glasgow physician who normally accompanies you would be of much use in this venture. You thought of recruiting me. What could be more elementary?'

'Holmes, this is mind-reading!' I sputtered.

'Nonsense, it is merely the product of close observation, together with analysis of a trivial sort – child's play when it is the actions of an old acquaintance which must be deciphered. There were other clues. You have absent-mindedly knotted the rope of your gown with a bowline, for example! But it is wearisome and futile to explain – let us rather make our plans. I shall be glad to accompany you. London is deadly in summer, without musical or criminal diversion. The Coolins are hardly the Alps, but they will serve well enough for amusement. I know them passably well,

<sup>1</sup> These case notes were discovered some years ago in the bottom of a box of old lantern slides, thought to have been donated to the Club by Norman Collie. The first set of notes formed the basis of *The Adventure of the Misplaced Eyeglasses* (SMCJ [1979] xxxi, p360); the second set resulted in *The Case of the Great Grey Man* (SMCJ [1986] xxxiii, p241). The sorry tale recounted here is based on the third and last set of case notes. I am greatly indebted to Robert Aitken for assistance in interpreting Watson's notes.

<sup>2</sup> Holmes is probably referring to H.O. Thomas's *The Past and Present Treatment of Intestinal Obstructions*, first published in 1877 – a standard work of the period.



from a previous excursion with my cousin, who is a great enthusiast. Indeed, I believe I have a mountain named after me – Sgurr Tearlach, Gaelic for Sherlock's Peak?<sup>3</sup>

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It was late in the evening when we arrived at the Sligachan Inn, having left London early on the previous day. Despite the long and weary hours of travel I felt my spirits lift as the coach rounded the last bends beyond Sconser and the Coolins came into view, the jagged peaks of Sgurr nan Gillean glowing brightly in the evening sunshine. After dinner Holmes went off to his room, pleading fatigue. I passed some time with the other guests, who instructed me in the use of the local spirit – a fiery potion named Talisker, reeking of peatsmoke and the sea. With a few of these inside me, and my head filled with their talk of climbing, I went off to bed looking forward to the exertions of the coming fortnight.

I will not weary you with an account of our campaign. Holmes performed with his customary agility and I followed him over and around the convoluted razor-backed ridges. Each evening we sipped Talisker at the smoking-room window and on most of them I was pleased to put another mark in the Holy Tables of Munro. We were often joined by a droll Scotchman from Hamilton, by name Naismith, who shared an interest in pugilism with Holmes and common acquaintance with his cousin Norman<sup>4</sup>. One evening Holmes was entertaining him with a tale of some battle between Cockney bruisers, when another guest, overhearing this colourful narrative, joined in with some observations of his own. He introduced himself as John Abernety. He and his brother, Henry, had recently arrived from Weymouth in Dorset for a climbing holiday. I felt obliged to make some remonstrance over this dreary talk of boxing.

'How should civilised gentlemen, in middle years, interest themselves in this brutal sport?' I complained. 'It serves no useful purpose except to provide the science of medicine with unusual sorts of brain injury!'

'Well said!' cried Henry Abernety. 'But you forgot the benefit it brings to bookmakers and the unusual injuries to the pockets of the followers!'

This sally brought a black look from brother, John, and some amusing

<sup>3</sup> According to Colin Phillip – the principal authority on Cuillin names – (see *SMCJ* [1916] xiv, p11) this peak was named by Collie and Naismith. Phillip reports that it was named after Charles Pilkington but adds: 'I cannot recall who suggested this.' Certainly, Tearlach is the usual Gaelic equivalent of Charles, but its pronunciation (roughly, 'tcherluch') bears such a close resemblance to Holmes's name that it seems likely that Holmes's given name is an anglicisation of the Gaelic name. As for his claim that it is named after him, this is an obvious jest. It is interesting that Holmes's spelling of the peak agrees with Phillip's and with the spelling on Professor Harker's *SMC* map of Skye published as an endpaper to Volume IX of the *Journal* in 1907 – a wonderful map, far superior to the ugly Priestman map which replaced it in 1923.

<sup>4</sup> The reference is to Norman Collie, identified as Holmes's cousin in the stories mentioned in Footnote 1. Watson's description of the habits and character of our Founder, here and below, are confirmed in Gilbert Thomson's illuminating obituary of Naismith in *SMCJ* [1936] xxi, p40.

arguments from Holmes and Naismith, but I was pleased to have found an ally. However, Henry Abernethy's enthusiasms turned out to be scarcely less repellent than his brother's. He proclaimed himself as a student of 'comparative religion' and soon began to prate about the teachings of the Bible and the Cabbala on the subject of fighting. Worse still, he found a willing partner in Naismith. Before long they were deep in a stultifying debate regarding the authorship of Old Testament histories. I left the company in disgust and retired to bed with a copy of Whympy's Scrambles.

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The following day, which was a Sunday, had been deemed an 'off' day by Holmes. When I descended to breakfast shortly before 10 o'clock, I found the room empty apart from Holmes.

'Where is everybody?' I inquired.

'Well, I have not seen the Abernethys, but their plan last night was to traverse Sgurr nan Gilleann. As you know, this is their usual place,' he waved a hand towards a neighbouring table littered with the debris of a meal, 'and as you can see they have eaten and gone. Have you no eyes, my dear Watson, or is it that you see but do not observe?'

'Come now, Holmes. I saw it well enough, but merely wished to make conversation.'

'Ah, just so. So where is Naismith?'

'Indeed I have no idea. Perhaps he is still abed.'

'What deuced poor conversation you make, Watson. Look, he sat at our table, to keep me company, for here in the ashtray is the dottle from his pipe – an unmistakably pungent leaf, but not so strong as to mask the odours of his cologne and the mothballs in the pockets of his best black suit. He has gone off to Portree in search of an English Service. If you are to assist me as we both would wish, you must master these simple deductions! Let us persevere. When did the Abernethys leave?'

'Good gracious, Holmes, I have no idea. Shall we ask Mrs Sharp<sup>5</sup>? She will surely know.'

'But you do not even try, Watson! Observe their table. The butter served with their haddock bore a sprig of parsley which has now sunk a half-inch into the dish. At room temperature, according to the prescriptions of my monograph *Clues Useful for Estimation of the Passage of Time*, this gives us an approximate time of service of one hour twenty minutes ago. Allow them twenty minutes to finish their meal and put on their boots. They left at nine o'clock<sup>6</sup>.'

'It is much too early for such bravura, Holmes!' I pleaded. 'Let us

<sup>5</sup> The Sharps were proprietors at Sligachan until 1900 (see G.D. Valentine's excellent paper: *At Sligachan – The Classic Age*. SMCJ [1945] xxiii, p224).

<sup>6</sup> Sherlockians will recognize the present case as that mentioned in *The Six Napoleons* in the following terms: 'You will remember, Watson, how the dreadful business of the Abernethy family was first brought to my notice by the depth to which the parsley had sunk into the butter on a hot day.' Holmes's description of the case is, as will be seen, a somewhat colourful exaggeration.

abandon conversation. I am sorry that I spoke. Pray leave me in peace to eat my haddock.'

'I am happy to do so, even though it is plainly a kippered herring. I shall be in the smoking lounge, dealing with my correspondence, should you require further conversation.'

I have made it a fast principle during my walking holidays to exercise every day, since otherwise my game leg is prone to stiffen disagreeably. I therefore consigned only the morning to leisure. After a light luncheon of cold salmon and lamb, I followed a recommendation of Naismith's and took a turn up the Red Burn to look at the Bhasteir Gorge, an impressive and sinister declivity bounding the path to Sgurr nan Gilleann on the west, apparently passable only by swimming – which I could well believe<sup>7</sup>. I made my way back out of the gorge and onto the track shortly before three o'clock. I had not descended far when I was astonished to see John Abernety hurrying across the moor from the Tourist Route, and in obvious distress.

'Watson,' he gasped, 'Henry has fallen from the ridge. I think he must be dead!' The poor fellow blurted out his story to me. They had crossed the mountain and were about to tackle the 'Policeman', an obstacle on the difficult lower portion of the western ridge. John had been on the point of suggesting that it was time to tie on their Alpine line, which he was carrying, when Henry had slipped and fallen down into the Bhasteir Corrie. Believing him to be killed by the fall, and lacking the confidence to negotiate the awkward Policeman section alone, John had traversed back over the mountain. My long experience of such affairs prompted me to ask him if he had noted the time of the accident. He guessed that it had been about 12.25: a few minutes beforehand they had discussed the idea of carrying on to the next peak and had determined the time as 12.20.

It seemed to me that Abernety was in no condition to climb back up to the site of the accident. I knew the place well enough – Holmes and I had made the same expedition some days before – so I sent him down to the hotel to recruit a stretcher party and turned back up the mountain to see what I could find. It was a stiff pull of an hour and more up to the cliffs below the Policeman. As I turned east to approach them I could make out a motionless figure draped over the screes. I judged that Henry had fallen about 100ft and must have died almost immediately. I made a brief examination: lower limbs, pelvis and spine were fractured. Evidently, he had landed on his feet, but of course after such a fall there are always massive internal injuries. I laid out the body ready for the bearers and thought to pass the time in waiting for them by examining the rocks above. He had fallen from a point on the ridge some distance to the east of the

<sup>7</sup> This tremendous gorge is well described in B.H. Humble's *The Cuillin of Skye*. Humble's description is taken from Clinton Dent's account of the first ascent (by Hastings, Slingsby and Hopkinson) in his *Alpine Journal* paper *The Rocky Mountains of Skye*. (Vol. XV, No. 112, p422). For some unaccountable reason, its ascent is nowadays unfashionable.

Policeman. Though the rocks hereabouts were impracticable, I found that some way to the left an easy-looking gully angled up to meet the ridge<sup>8</sup>. It struck me as odd that Abernethy had not let himself down here to assist his brother. He had rope enough, surely, to secure it to some flake of rock and thereby provide a safe means of descent. Perhaps he was so shaken by the incident that he did not think of it.

As I returned to poor Henry's body I could see a party making its way over the slabby rocks at the entrance to the corrie. Soon three local men arrived carrying a stretcher. They were not disposed to linger, nor equipped for English conversation, so we quickly loaded up and began the descent. It was a long and exhausting business and I was very happy to see Naismith and Holmes join us to share the burden over the last interminable mile or so across the bogs to the hotel. Meanwhile, one of the men went ahead to warn Mr Sharp of our arrival and to make arrangements for accommodation of the body. Sharp and John Abernethy stood waiting in the hotel yard as we walked in. Abernethy shuffled up to the stretcher and put a hand on his dead brother's cold face.

'Poor Henry!', he muttered, 'I hope he did not suffer much. Did he . . . Was he dead when you got up to him, Watson?'

'He had been dead a while,' I replied shortly. 'His injuries were very severe. There was nothing you could have done for him, I'm afraid.'

Sharp then guided us to an outhouse beyond the stables. We laid the body on a table within and prepared to take our leave.

'Mr Abernethy would like a few moments with his brother,' said Sharp. 'I will wait with him and look up. I will have to send word for Dr McLeod and the Portree Sergeant to come tomorrow. They'll want to examine the body and prepare a report. There should be two doctors present. Would you be so good as to assist the local man, Dr Watson?' I nodded agreement and walked over to the hotel with Holmes and Naismith. Mrs Sharp had left out sandwiches and refreshment, which we took into the porch. I recounted the day's events, including my conclusion that Abernethy might have made more of an effort to go to the aid of his brother.

'True enough,' put in Naismith, 'that gully is an easy enough place to come down<sup>9</sup>. Or he might have gone down into Lota Corrie – that is not difficult – and come around by the Bealach a' Bhasteir. The route is plainly marked on Harker's map. That would be a long road, but a deal shorter than the road he took.'

'I have to say, too,' I added, 'that I was surprised that he did not at least come up the path to meet us. Should he not have been anxious to know as

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<sup>8</sup> Evidently Nicolson's Chimney (1873).

<sup>9</sup> The rocks around Nicolson's Chimney were nevertheless the scene of another fatal accident in August 1901, when Mr Whincup – climbing in the (unroped) company of another Aberdeen solicitor Mr Fraser – fell to the screes and then bounced over the lower cliffs to the corrie below. Fraser descended immediately, found Whincup all but dead and raced to Sligachan in one hour. Fraser returned with help in two hours, but to no avail (see SMCJ [1902] vii, p41).



soon as possible whether his brother had survived the fall? I wonder if perhaps there is more to this incident than a simple fall. He acts like a man with something on his conscience.'

'Indeed,' said Holmes, 'so you presume to speculate regarding a death in the mountains. You have been discreet, I trust, since proof of mischief in such places is almost impossible to secure. In general, the matter is quite hopeless. Guilty conduct means little in such a case. Think of it: you are alive and the other is dead. Who is there to blame but yourself? Certainly, mountains are the ideal place in which to dispose of an enemy. Means and opportunity lie everywhere at hand. All that is needed is a slight push, and gravity will complete the job! Moreover, where a fatal accident is always a distinct possibility, those who would inquire must do so under enormous disadvantages. Since the ground itself is murderous, establishing means and opportunity are of no value. Putting aside the remote chance of a direct witness, we are left with motive. But motive alone is never enough for conviction. If a good motive were sufficient to commit murder, you would have done for me years ago, and I you!' 'And between brothers,' said Naismith, 'a good motive is seldom hard to discover.'

'I am chastened, but I am also sure that you exaggerate the difficulties. Look, here is Abernety coming now. At least ask him a question or two, Holmes.' Abernety approached the porch doors with downcast eyes, but turned towards us as he entered.

'Thank you, Watson, for what you tried to do for Henry. I still can't believe that this has happened.' He dropped into a chair and put his head in his hands.

'Unexpected death is always shocking,' said Holmes after some moments, 'especially so when one is a witness to it. Were you close beside him when he fell?'

Abernety jerked upright. 'Good gracious, no!' he cried, and plunged his head in his hands again.

'Where were you, then?' asked Holmes gently.

'I was ahead,' he mumbled, 'I had just turned a corner of the ridge. Henry was perhaps 15ft or so behind me. I heard him cry out, just once and not very loud . . . I did not even see him fall! Oh! I cannot bear to talk about it.' Abernety turned a stricken face to us, lurched to his feet and staggered through the hotel doors.

A few moments later Sharp entered. He asked me to hold the outhouse key until Dr McLeod arrived tomorrow and passed it to me. Then Naismith made his apologies and disappeared into the hotel with Sharp.

'Well, Watson, you may have something,' said Holmes after a moment. 'Let us enjoy the evening air. If we are to talk about this further we would do well to do so privately.'

We walked over the bridge and followed the Sligachan river down

towards the shore. Eventually, we stopped to sit on a convenient boulder. Holmes produced a flask and two silver cups. I poured while he stoked his pipe.

'The principles of interrogation are simple,' said Holmes. 'It is necessary to interrogate as soon as possible, before the suspect has had time to manufacture convincing lies. And it is necessary to ask questions which a guilty man is disposed to answer with lies. You heard his answers. What do you think? If he did push his brother to his doom, then of course he was beside him. "Good gracious, no!", he answered, and vehemently. And then he was in front when it happened. That is the safest place for a guilty man to pretend to be. Naturally, he would have been behind, so that he could choose the spot and so that he could look around for possible witnesses before closing on his victim. And "he cried out", but "not very loud". When there is a violent accident of any kind, it is usually the onlookers who cry out rather than the victim, who is desperately trying to save his life. Since that is so, in this case probably there would be no cry. But of course the common expectation is that the victim would scream as he fell. So it is safest to say "he cried out", but "not very loud" for someone else may have been nearby, approaching the ridge from the other direction perhaps, and would be able to say "No, I heard nothing". Yes, my friend, perhaps you have something after all.'

'But how can we proceed? Surely it is impossible to tell whether he fell or was pushed?'

'Well, as I said earlier, in general terms it is indeed impossible. But in particular cases there may be indications. We have already discovered some, have we not? Now let us suppose that we are in such a place and that I slip and plunge to my doom. What will you do?'

'Do? I should be devastated, of course. I would observe your fall, so far as I was able, and mark the place where you came to rest. I should look for any sign of movement. I should also take care not to fall myself!'

'Indeed, Watson, I am sure you would do that. And then . . . ?'

'I would seek out the shortest safe route to where you lay and go there as speedily as possible.'

'Why?'

'Well, you might perhaps still be alive. If so, I would treat your injuries, wrap you in my clothes, leave you my flask and descend rapidly to the hotel to fetch help, taking careful note of the route, of course.'

'Very good, Watson. An excellent plan. Would anyone act differently in these circumstances?'

'No. I do not think so. I would take no credit for these actions. They are obvious duties which anyone would fulfil.'

Holmes paused to refill our cups.

'Now, Watson, attend. Suppose, *per contra*, you have pushed me: my habit of butchering Paganini's Caprices at 3a.m. has finally fractured your











patient soul. I plunge below, combining the conventional cry of horror with a reproachful stare. What now?’

I meditated my way through a half-inch of Talisker. ‘Goodness, Holmes, I should do exactly the same. After all you might not be absolutely killed. Supposing that you were not, I could not leave you alive to accuse me. I would find a convenient boulder and crush your skull. A bloody and cruel business no doubt, but it would have to be done.’ We paused to contemplate this unlikely nemesis of Holmes.

‘Quite so. That is why it is in general impossible to tell. Victims of a push or a fall excite the same response in their companions, although for different reasons. But let us suppose that your disposition is somewhat squeamish. You have courage and malice enough to cast me down a mountain, but to administer the *coup de grace* is beyond you. That is surely plausible, even if the fatal push was coldly planned and premeditated. If it was, on the other hand, impulsive – perhaps caused by some offensive remark of mine about your want of skill with pen or stethoscope – then it is even less likely that you would compound your felony by doing me to death with a hand-axe. So what may we conclude?’

‘I see what you mean, Holmes. A companion who does not make his best efforts to get to the body of the fallen man must be viewed with some suspicion.’

‘Absolutely, Watson, and not entirely elementary. Such conduct indicates foul play and squeamishness at once, and it indicates them quite strongly.’

‘Of course!’ I exclaimed, ‘so that is why I felt so much concern in the present case. Now I understand it! A rogue and a coward to boot! Let us fetch him out of his room and confront him.’ I rose to my feet in anger.

‘Calm down, old fellow!’ said Holmes, pouring the remains of the flask into my cup. ‘We are barely halfway to our quarry. Now consider further, you have impulsively thrust me off the ledge to my probable death. So far so good. You peer downwards to observe my corpse strewn on the hillside. Does it move a little? Perhaps it does. You are not sure. But nothing will persuade you to descend to the remains. You fear that life still lingers in that shattered bloody ruin, that I will twitch an accusing finger, groaning “Why, friend, why?”. You know that you could not stomach the measures necessary to still that accusing finger for ever. So you go down for help, since you are bound by every human duty and by ordinary prudence to do at least that. As you go, you fabricate a plausible story: you could not find your way down to me alone, you were confused and distraught, etc. Do you go down quickly by the shortest route?’

‘No indeed. I linger, since every passing minute makes your demise more certain.’

‘Just so. You will take your time. Indeed you might take rather a lot of time and may consider lying about the time of the unhappy event, postponing it to such a time as will make your descent appear prompt, although this ruse is plainly hazardous.’

'And can we glean any clue from the times in the present case?'

'I do not believe so. Naismith is expert in the estimation of times. We know, thanks to my calculation at breakfast, which you so brutally derided, that the Abernethys left at 9 o'clock. According to Naismith they should have been on the peak at around midday, so 12.25 is a perfectly plausible time for the accident to happen. You met Abernethy on the path just before three. His descent was a little slow, perhaps, but not unreasonably so.'

'So what shall we do now? Do we have enough evidence to denounce Abernethy?' 'No, we have nothing approximating proof, only an accumulation of indications. We must bide our time and keep our counsel. In any case, I am on holiday and have no client. Perhaps Henry Abernethy was a black hearted villain who deserved his fate! However, when you carry out the examination tomorrow, please attend to the curious condition of the dead man's fingers.'

'His fingers? But I have already attended to them. There was nothing whatever curious about them. They were clean and well groomed.'

'That, Watson, is the curious condition<sup>10</sup>. Except under very odd circumstances a slip will result in a fall to the ground followed by an accelerating sliding descent which becomes in due course a free fall. What would you do in these first moments of the catastrophe? You would dig your fingers into the rock in a desperate search for a hold, would you not?'

'Indeed I surely would. And I am also sure that you are about to tell me that this is yet another circumstance or indication which does not amount to proof.'

I rose up in disgust, drained the last of the whisky and set off to return to the hotel somewhat unsteadily, I confess – as the last light drained from the peaks of Sgurr nan Gilleann and Bhasteir. It had been a long and exasperating day and I was more than ready for the benison of sleep.

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In the morning I conducted Dr McLeod and Sergeant McLean to the outhouse. McLeod cut off the clothing and we began to inventory the injuries while McLean examined the personal effects.

Suddenly he spoke up. 'Here's a very curious thing, gentlemen! Look at his watch, will you?' He flipped the watch open and passed it over.

It was an odd watch, certainly, having two small dials set one above the other in the face. The upper dial gave the time in the usual way, and the lower dial gave the date. It was stopped, of course, and the glass was gone.

'The time, man, the time!', said McLean impatiently.

'Of course!', I said, 'Eight minutes past four o'clock! It is hopelessly wrong, since he fell at 12.25! Perhaps it ran on for a while. But the date is

<sup>10</sup> Watson is a slow learner. Holmes used exactly this type of deduction, in relation to 'a dog which did not bark in the night-time' in an earlier case – *Silver Blaze*.

wrong also. The hand points to the 1st, but this is the 15th!

'Aye, so it is. And besides, how does broken glass fall out of a closed watch? Tell me that, sir!'

I hurried through the examination, impatient to consult Holmes about this bewildering matter of the watch, signed the certificate and rushed over to the hotel to wash. I found Holmes and Naismith deep in conversation in the smoking lounge. The combined effect of their pipes had reduced the lounge to a condition recalling the thickest of London fogs.

'Good heavens, Holmes, what an appalling fug!' I cried. 'Be so good as to open a window!'

Holmes rose and threw the windows open. 'Watson, Naismith has interesting news. He was up with the lark, and off to Portree in the dogcart. We now have a motive. Tell him, Naismith!'

'My father owns a newspaper, Watson, – *The Hamilton Advertiser*,' he said, 'so I sent a telegram to our office, who forwarded it to *The Weymouth Telegram*. They then replied directly to me in Portree.' He produced a telegram. 'It seems that John Abernetty has heavy gambling debts and that he will inherit a considerable sum on Henry's death. So there is motive enough, although – as we allowed last night – it is a question whether this would count for much in Court.'

'Let us review the case,' said Holmes, 'and then you may give us the new evidence which you are bursting to deliver, Watson!'

Holmes paced back and forth before the window, enumerating the several indications of foul play so far discovered in what seemed to me to be an unnecessarily pedantic fashion, while I fretted to have the mystery of the watch explained. Eventually, I was allowed to speak.

'His watch! There was no glass in it when Sergeant McLean opened it! It was stopped - broken - and gave the date as the 1st and the time as eight minutes past four! He must have consulted his broken watch after he fell! Why would anyone do that?'

'Come, Watson,' said Holmes, 'your question is surely rhetorical. The answer is that no-one would do such a thing. You know my methods. Since the glass is gone, he must have opened his watch, but not to consult it. Rather he moved the dead hands of the watch to 4.8 on the 1st. Why? To pass a message, of course! In the context the message is clear enough – I was pushed! – but can we perhaps make it clearer?'

While they pulled at their pipes I struggled to think of what the dead man's message might be. One – four – eight? Could it be the number of some kind of locomotive, perhaps?

'Of course!' cried Naismith. 'I have it! Abernetty was a Rosicrucian and an adept of Scripture. Such folk even take decisions by using date and time as a code to divine a guiding text, or so I have heard<sup>11</sup>. One is the Book, four is the Chapter and eight is the Verse. Genesis 4:8.'

As I rose to fetch a Bible he stilled me with a wave of his pipe. 'I have no need of the Book. I learned it in my cradle.' Naismith stood up, turned to face Sgurr nan Gillean and intoned: 'And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him!'

As these awful words rang in our ears we saw a figure jump to the ground from above the open window. It was Abernethy. He rose to his feet, turned to stare at us briefly and despairingly, then ran off in the direction of the Sgurr. I reached for my stick and moved to pursue him.

'No, Watson, let him run,' said Holmes, 'He will not get far. I had forgotten that his room lay directly above. I fear that he must have heard everything.'

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Holmes was right: Abernethy got only as far as the Bhasteir Gorge, with Sergeant McLean in futile pursuit, and promptly cast himself into it. Accordingly, when we made our melancholy departure from Sligachan on the following day, we had for company two coffins consigned to Weymouth and lashed to the roof of the coach.

Several days later, we were once more before the hearth in Baker Street. I finished the last of my notes describing this appalling case, tied up the file and laid aside my pen.

'Holmes,' I said, 'I have spent the day talking to a lawyer friend and studying medical reports of men who have suffered falls. I have come to three conclusions and would value your opinion about them.'

'Certainly, Watson, what is it you have discovered?'

'I have discovered that there was no case against Abernethy. He could have stuck to his story and gone free. The business of the watch meant nothing. It might have been broken days before. I have also discovered that it is next to impossible for a man recently fallen from a height, severely shocked and bruised, at best semi-conscious, to remove a watch, adjust it in the manner required and return it to his waistcoat pocket. My third conclusion is that you contrived the whole dreadful business. You made sure that I drank too much Talisker that night, so that you could remove my

<sup>11</sup> This method of divination is a variant of the *sortes Biblicae* – in which a page of scripture was selected at random, and a verse obtained by random pointing. This method was widely used in mediaeval monastic traditions but, following proscription, it was used only by secret religious and occult groups such as Rosicrucians and Freemasons. Rosicrucianism enjoyed a considerable vogue in late Victorian England: among our own members Aleister Crowley was associated with the London Order of the Golden Dawn until he abandoned white magic for the more interesting sort. Naismith's knowledge of these arcane methods may well have been due to acquaintance with Crowley. Contemporary applications of the *sortes* may be found in Tennyson's *Enoch Arden* (1862) and Conrad F. Meyer's *Der Heilige* (1879). More recently, Ellis Peter's novel of mediaeval detection *The Holy Thief* provides a dramatic example.



key as I slept and tamper with Abernetty's watch. You did not *forget* that Abernetty's room lay above us, but rather chose to reveal our suspicions in his hearing, speaking loudly before an open window. You wished to spare yourself the tedium of attending an inquiry in Inverness and the ignominy of giving evidence in an unsuccessful murder trial, so you persuaded Abernetty to his death!

'Tut, Watson, these are hard words to come from a friend. And where is there any proof? Did I force the Talisker down your throat? No. Was it I who wished the windows opened? No. Was it I who saw the hands of the watch pointing to Genesis 4:8? Again, no. A scholar like Naismith would have found a suitable text from almost any setting of the watch.'

Holmes reached down a Bible from his shelf and began to thumb through it. 'Let me see, the deed was done at 12.25 on the 14th. The 14th Book is Second Chronicles . . . Ah, yes . . . In the code used by some Rosicrucians it is the minute hand which gives the chapter, and the hour which gives the verse . . . So Chapter 25, Verse 12 . . . I have it: "And other ten thousand left alive did the children of Judah carry away captive, and brought them unto the top of the rock, and cast them down from the top of the rock, that they were all broken in pieces." Surely a better text! As you say, the broken watch meant nothing. John Abernetty took the time from his own watch, read his pocket Bible and took the text as excuse to kill his brother!'

'But I see that you are quite incredulous, Watson. How then shall we resolve this matter? Let the Good Book decide.'

He glanced at the clock.

'It is now eight minutes past ten on the 21st . . . That would be Ecclesiastes 10:8: "He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him". Justice was done, Watson, let that be an end of it.'

'So be it, Holmes,' I said, placing the file on the highest shelf, 'although I am sure that any verse from the misanthropic author of Ecclesiastes would have served as well. At least you will agree that this story cannot on any account be published?'

'Absolutely, Watson. On mountains we must remain Idealists: no *real* crimes are to be found there, alas; for none may be detected.

## DALWHINNIE

By I.H.M. Smart

*Dalwhinnie even now can be a dour place to wait for something to happen. Two of the following stories tell of waiting there for lifts in the days of long ago, while the third is an update . . .*

### **The days of innocence.**

IN APRIL 1945 we put up our cotton tent in the wood at the Loch Erich turnoff. The time passes slowly when you are 15 and we lay for interminable hours wrapped in our blankets waiting for some vehicle to pass. The roof with its camouflage pattern flapped monotonously in the grey wind. It was painted thus because of wartime regulations. A white tent would have attracted enemy bombers.

We were on our way back from an expedition into the fastnesses of Rothiemurchus, boldly going beyond the remote village of Coylum Bridge, along the pot-holed cart track to uninhabited Loch Morlich and then by the narrow footpath through the primeval forest to the Clach Bharraig bothy. We spent the night in this half-legendary, now-vanished howff whose presence we had known about through the oral tradition. The next day we climbed Cairngorm and felt we had accomplished a great feat. We really were that naive. Then we camped in the woods over by the mouth of the Lairig and had a little fire under the stars, intimidated by the old trees that loomed darkly around us. On our second day by the bleak snow-dusted roadside we heard an engine, not a bomber but a military vehicle of some kind. Usually, army lorries did not stop as it was against regulations to pick up civilians. We had been hoping for a commercial traveller, the only civilians who made long journeys by road in these years. We hurriedly packed up just in case. A long flat-bedded lorry lumbered up with a ruined aircraft on board. We thumbed it despondently. It stopped! The driver, a genial soul, told us to hop on the back but to lie down out of sight if he blew the horn as this would mean the approach of other military traffic. We climbed aboard and found half-a-dozen people already there. There was a dignified, fine-featured woman with two windswept children; they were from Glen Fruin and spoke Gaelic. We gathered her husband had been killed in the Western Desert. The Highlands were still largely inhabited by Highlanders at that time. It would be strange today but then it was quite normal. They were, however, already unprofitable anachronisms, the Scottish equivalent of Red Indians. We did not understand that after the war they would be surplus to requirements and would have to go. We in our innocence treated them with deference; we felt we were visitors to their inalienable native heath. The other passengers were three dishevelled

civilian men who looked down on their luck. They were very old, maybe even in their 40s. We all crouched together under the wreckage in what little shelter we could get from the slipstream.

The Highland family got off at Calvine, the rest of us at Dunkeld. Nearer to Perth the road got busy, maybe a car an hour and our driver didn't want to chance his luck any further. We thanked him and, chilled to the gizzard started to walk south into a hard blue gloaming. We reached Birnam where there was a Youth Hostel in the old school, now levelled to the ground. There was no resident warden and it was a cold draughty place with a high ceiling. We had a whole tin of beans left, also some dog biscuits. (Food was rationed at the time and we were quite rightly never allowed to take our ration books away from home: besides, financial constraints were such that the less you ate, the longer you could stay away). After supper round a smoky coal-burning grate that shed heat grudgingly we retired to the bunks and lay under a heap of blankets, converting our beans and dog-biscuits into heat by shivering. We were, I repeat, so naive we thought that this was the normal way of doing things. I can remember being aware of the luxury of finally feeling warm and the blessing of shelter from the night wind that was making the rafters creek. There were no lights in the darkness outside; the war had another month to go.

### **Ship of the road.**

Later in the same year we were once again becalmed on the north-south traffic watershed at Dalwhinnie, this time on the return from our first trip beyond the Great Glen, until then a closed area requiring a military pass to enter. We had seen the fabled country to the north, reached the remote Cuillins and climbed the Window Buttress and the easy side of the Inaccessable Pinnacle with an ancient, inadequate hemp rope. I think we thought we had really made it into the first rank as rock climbers; we were obviously still very naive, but then we had only read books on the craft, had no friends who were rock climbers and youth leaders had yet to be invented.

As petrol was rationed traffic was sparse, but then so were hitch-hikers, and most vehicles would pick you up; there was still a sort of camaraderie in the air. After a few hours something approached from the north. It emitted black smoke and rode the undulations of the old road like a well-found vessel, for this is what it was, a steam-driven ship of the road, probably one of the last of the puffing billies. It clanked to a halt smoking and hissing. Three black faces with bright shining smiles beamed down us: 'If youse come wi us, ye'll hae tae pass us coal fae the back,' said Para Handy, indicating room beside the coal on the back platform. MacPhail and Sunny Jim beamed down in confirmation. We gratefully accepted. Steam lorries even then were archaic vehicles; this might be the last possibility of riding a live and working dinosaur and a paradoxically early

carboniferous one at that. *Vitalsparkosaurus Rex* weighed anchor and set course for its home port of Inverkeithing. I can't remember much about the journey but we must have steamed our way all day along a rambling archaic version of the A9. I can remember climbing the narrow winding road up Glen Farg, because we had to stop at the Bien Inn to do something mysterious to the engine. The crew made a brew over the fire in blackened syrup tins with wire handles. They generously decanted some of the creosote into our mugs. At Inverkeithing the ship of the road berthed and the crew disbanded. 'Ye'll be in Embro the nicht,' they said waving farewell. We too were now the colour of the crew and undeniably proletarian. Thus promoted, we got friendly greetings from passers-by in the street and were addressed as equals by the lassie in the chip shop as she wrapped up our suppers. Like ship-wrecked mariners we trudged to the Queen's Ferry, signed up for the passage and managed to reach home in douce, perjink, bourgeois old Embro that evening. I remember my mother saying: 'Thank goodness you arrived after dark.'

### **Selling the Pass.**

Recently, I spent an August day exploring the mysterious territory around Gaick and was returning in the late afternoon to my car near the old Dalwhinnie road end. From the heights of Carn na Caim I could see the great new road crowded with traffic streaming north out of Atholl and skailing bumper to bumper into Badenoch and Strath Spey (or the Spey Valley as the new owners call it). It was some sort of holiday in the dark south and a major population shift was taking place. Cars and caravans trying to make the best time they could mingled with lorries and vans bent on maximising their speed. None of these vehicles were dangerously ramshackle, rusty and bald-tired like so many cars of the frugal Fifties: they all had heaters and radios and cassette players and did not need to rely on hand signals. I had sufficient recall of the elder days to realise the magnitude of the new wealth blessing the land and the inordinate increase in happiness that must surely have accompanied it. However, the memory suddenly came of a postcard I once bought in Tombstone City, Arizona. It was a photograph of the great Apache chief, Cochise. It depicted a man with a noble demeanour. His visage was intelligent and dignified but, nevertheless, wore a deeply puzzled expression, probably the same look he wore when he sat on his horse watching yet another covered wagon train appearing over the eastern horizon. No matter how many palefaces his Apaches killed, replacements arrived in increasing numbers. On such an occasion he was heard to remark with weary incomprehension: 'Is there no end to these people?' The norms of his world had collapsed. An alien population explosion could no longer be controlled by the tomahawk. Yet, had he but realised it, these people coming over the horizon were mobile profit, potential customers rather than potential scalps. With a good lawyer



he might have negotiated the Arizona Big Mac franchise for himself and scholarships to West Point and the Harvard Business School for his sons. He could have become a real Big Mac, that is, a Highland instead of a Red Indian Chief.

And so I stood with my arms across my chest, tried to look noble, watched the covered wagons rolling endlessly over the southern horizon, muttered: 'Is there no end to these people?' And then tried to realise that these were not really people but customers, profit on the hoof, a source of wealth. Dignified surrender may be all very well for making tragic postcards but has no real biological future. After all, even we in the SMC, toffee-nosed elitists though we are, depend on increasing the numbers of customers who stay in our huts and buy our guide books and so increase the cash flow of the Trust. I could feel my belay taking the strain as my expression started to become streetwise and speculative.

## TABLE MOUNTAIN

It's done. Sign on.  
Carry your stone to the cairn.  
Initial the mist.  
Then go down  
Add your own  
name to the list.

A long climb.  
For a long time.  
Hundreds of thousands of feet.  
And after each top  
another one yet to go up.  
But now you can stop.

Compleat.  
And the sun has come through, what a sight.  
Every mountain in Scotland laid out  
neat underfoot, your friends will delight  
hearing each night your account of this great  
incomparable view.

Mostly of you.

*G.J.F. Dutton.*

## REMEMBERING A CUILLIN PIONEER

By H.M. Brown

1993 WAS the centenary of the death of Sheriff Alexander Nicolson, whose name is remembered in the name of Skye's highest summit. He was the first to climb Sgurr Alasdair and that was only one of several outstanding discoveries and climbs by this largely-forgotten pioneer, whom Ben Humble in his history of Skye climbing called 'the great explorer'. (*B.H. Humble: The Cuillin of Skye* – Hale 1952, is a collector's item but is available in a modern reprint from the Ernest Press.)

The first real explorer of the Cuillin was another remarkable figure, Professor James Forbes, 'the wonder child of his generation' who gained his chair at the age of 23 and was to pioneer the science of glaciology. For two decades after his appointment he went to mountains regularly, whether Alps, Pyrenees, or Skye. He and a local man first ascended Sgurr nan Gilleann (1836) by what is now called the Tourist Route. Nine years later he made the first ascent of Bruach na Frithe and drew the first accurate map of the range. Most other early travellers had been romantics, in the wake of Scott, Turner, Horatio MacCulloch, etc., heading for Loch Coruisk with its wildly inaccurate description of being sunless and surrounded by unscalable precipices. It needed a Skye man to explore and extol the rich reality – Alexander Nicolson.

Nicolson was born in Husabost, Skye, in 1827, where his father was a tacksman under Macleod of Macleod. He made himself an able student but abandoned his original vocation of the church to try and earn a living as a writer. Journalism was then left for law and he became an advocate in 1860.

Nicolson was unlucky in life. Success, fame, wealth always eluded him and while many men could have been made bitter in these circumstances, his nature kept him content enough. Perhaps he lacked the killer-instinct, the greedy self-seeking, to soar as many of his peers did. He was known as a charmer, a singer, a wit, a rhymester, a big man of open features and warm heart, 'perhaps the most popular man of his time in Edinburgh'. Fun, rather than ambition, lay behind his Skye ploys, and the love of the place, for itself, rather than as a scientific objective (as with Forbes) kept him returning whenever possible. His long Sligachan romance was to be repeated a generation later by the climbing academician, Norman Collie. Even when Nicolson's active days were over just being there was enough. He was one of the first to climb, and say so, purely for fun.

Sligachan greeted him (as it has done a few folk since) with a thunderstorm but he evidently revelled in this. '... among the towering black mass of the Cuillin rolled and seethed a lurid array of lead-coloured clouds, grim and threatening'. His name cropped up continually in the Bible-thick Visitors' Book at Sligachan, a treasure I browsed through by the hour as a

youngster and in which we so diffidently added our record of the now commonplace Ridge Traverse. The book has been stolen and, being irreplaceable and unique, it can never be sold or passed on. (If the selfish culprit should read this, can I plead for the book to re-appear mysteriously somewhere, to take its rightful place again.)

Many of Nicolson's doings were described in *Good Words*, a magazine edited by Dr Norman Macleod – Queen Victoria's chaplain, a famous preacher and influential churchman. *Good Words* was an immensely popular publication (with a circulation which would be the envy of most outdoor magazines today), its rather unfortunate title hiding plenty of stories of outdoor activities. It is a pity Nicolson never produced a Skye book for he wrote good clean prose. Perhaps that innate talent for missing the boat applied again. He was no Skye ostrich though. He foresaw the vast tourist potential of the island and lived long enough to see it happen. As early as 1872 he was suggesting a bridge at Kyle might not be a bad idea. Camasunary he envisaged would have its Grand Hotel de Blaveinn. Today's bothy was a Victorian 'establishment for reforming drunkards'.

Thinking of books, the first, the SMC guidebook, was to come in 1907 and, in 1908, A.P. Abraham's *Rock-Climbing in Skye* had an even bigger influence. The Abraham brothers climbed all the known routes and made several notable first ascents to produce this classic. The superb photos were all taken with whole-plate cameras. They were early motorists. Such were the changes. Nicolson had none of these aids. Not even Munro's Tables. Scotland, never mind Skye, was *terra incognita*.

Few briefs came Nicolson's way and some law reporting, lecturing and general writing barely kept him going till he was appointed Sheriff-substitute of Kircudbright (1872) and, later, of Greenock (1885). Before going to Kircudbright he had been offered, and turned down, the chair of Celtic Studies at Edinburgh University, which would have appeared the perfect place for his talents. He was a notable Gaelic scholar, with a delight in Gaelic poetry and song. Plenty of the Sligachan Visitors' Book entries are in Gaelic. He retired to Edinburgh and died in January 1893, aged 66.

His first real mountain visit to the Cuillin was in 1865 (he was then 38) and if the weather was wild, well, he could wait, warning the impatient: 'If they are in a hurry, Skye and its clouds (and its inhabitants) are in none, and the Cuillin will unveil their majestic heads, in due time and no sooner.'

'To see them is worth a week's waiting – to see the black peaks start out like living creatures, high above the clouds which career up the cleft ridges, now hiding and now revealing their awful faces . . .' For Nicolson it was all 'life and music'.

Skye saw 'few strangers except yachtsmen, bagmen and a stray geologist', yet locals (shepherds and keepers) obviously had a peripheral knowledge and were occasionally enrolled to guide visitors. When Nicolson climbed Sgurr nan Gilleann in 1865 MacIntyre, the Sligachan keeper, went

with him (just as MacIntyre *pere* had gone with Forbes in 1836) and they went up by the Tourist Route. But the character of the man then appears. Instead of descending the same way he persuaded his companion to try a new traverse of the mountain.

So they made the first descent of the West Ridge until they came up against the late, lamented gendarme and, perforce, made a 'vermicular descent' down a chimney to the screes of Coir' a' Bhasteir, a route now known as Nicolson's Chimney and still regularly used as a way up the peak. Nicolson returned to climb up the West Ridge shortly after. He was the first to comment on the super-adhesive qualities of gabbro.

After descending Nicolson's Chimney our explorer traversed under the Tooth and up Bruach na Frithe, a day which obviously well-satisfied and led to many similar ventures. When Knight climbed his eponymous peak on Gillean's Pinnacle Ridge he wrote to tell Nicolson of his climb. Some years later Nicolson and Gibson were to find Knight's card in a bottle on its summit. Nicolson was a Vice-President of the Scottish Mountaineering Club and a lifelong friend of some of its members. Nicolson didn't hesitate to wander alone if shepherd or friend was unavailable nor did he hesitate to bivvy on the Cuillin, lying wrapped in his plaid (none of our soft gear and equipment) and eating cold fare and water. He wrote lyrical descriptions of his nights out and how 'the rich gloaming still lingers tenderly in the north west till bars of yellow light are seen in the east heralding the dawn'.

A trip, as unconventional, and tough as any today, was largely done at night and is worth recalling; almost incidentally, it included the first ascent of that elusive and tricky Munro, Sgurr Dubh Mor.

This was in September 1874. He and a friend had been visiting an artist at Loch Coruisk so it was 4p.m. when they set off for this unknown hill, which was bold, rather than rash, given Nicolson's unique experience of the Cuillin, a steady barometer and the promise of a full moon.

They went up An Garbh Coire, between Sgurr Dubh and Gars-bheinn, a coire choked with a mass of huge boulders and giving difficult passage. Once, coming down the coire, I was glad to shelter, quite dry, in its subterranean depths during a thunderstorm – as did Nicolson on this ascent for a less worrying shower of rain. Then, as now, route-finding was intricate and the summit was reached at sunset (7p.m.) and the descent was started in the gloaming, again, choosing deliberately to head into unknown country down into Coir 'an Lochain, still rarely visited and from where an ascent of Sgurr Dubh is specifically not recommended by guidebooks.

They soon ran into trouble. Halfway down a steep wall barred progress and Nicolson brought into play his secret weapon – his plaid. He was lowered down and backed against the wall so his (lighter) companion could hang down to stand on his shoulders. They fought down in shadowed blackness for two-and-a-half hours, finishing with a water-spraying gully,



their finger tips shredded and mighty relieved to be down safe and sound into the moonlit valley bottom. The plaid could be put away.

Nicolson described this item of clothing and its usefulness: with a belt it could be made into a dress for a man, serve as bedclothes, as a bag, as a sail for a boat, a rope for rock climbing, a curtain, an awning, a carpet, a hammock . . . and it had one superiority in that 'there's room in it for twa'.

Their adventures were not yet over. Nicolson tried to take a new short cut over Druim nam Ramh to Harta Coire and Glen Sligachan. It didn't 'go' (the moon disappeared again) so they had to descend and go along to the other end of the loch for the usual crossing of Druim Hain. Blaven, which Nicolson considered the finest hill in Skye, loomed in the east. They reached the Sligachan Hotel at 3a.m.

A year earlier (1873) Nicolson had made the ascent of the peak which would be named after him. At that time everything thereabouts was lumped together as Sgurr Sgumain, the name now used for the lower, seaward subsidiary crest. He had wandered up from Glen Brittle on a wild, wet day and had reached Lochan Coire Lagan when the driving cloud cleared briefly to reveal a monster peak overhead 'one of the wildest objects I had ever seen'. He was back next day with Macrae, a local shepherd and able hillman.

The fine day began with an ascent of Sgurr na Banachdich (he'd recently made its first recorded ascent) from which they traversed the by no means straight-forward ridge to Sgurr Dearg on what may have been a first ascent. Bypassing the Inaccessible Pinnacle he wrote: 'it might be possible with ropes and grappling irons . . . but hardly seems worth the trouble.' What a pity he did not take the trouble, but his priority was exploration, movement, the 'leaping from rock to rock' and not any siege of a single problem. The Pilkington brothers in 1880 proved his opinion as to its feasibility to be correct. His was the first close encounter of the Inn Pin by a real climber. Everything that day was new.

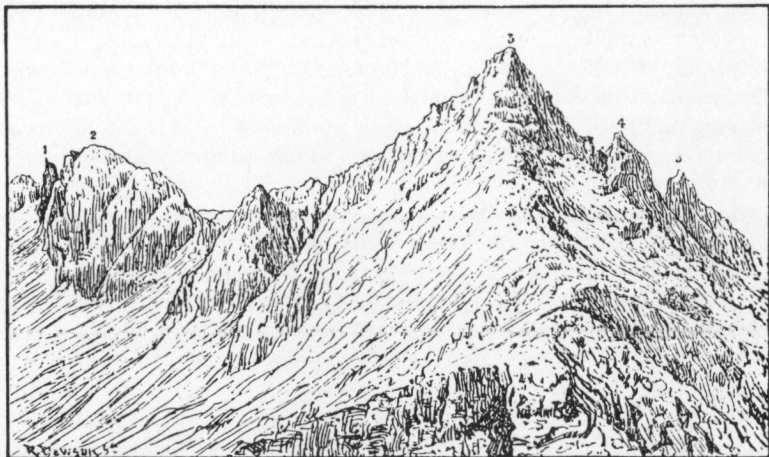
Nicolson looked across the coire to his objective and at once spotted the single line of weakness, the Great Stone Shoot as we now know it (even though, today, it has largely shot its boulders). Right of the huge gully two other great exploratory routes were to go up: Collie's climb in 1896 (Collie, Howell, Naismith) and Abrahams' Climb in 1907. But Nicolson was before them all and recording the success with an understatement worthy of Tom Patey: 'I have seen worse places.'

The early Seventies saw a rapid rise in ascents being made from Sligachan. Faster and faster times were recorded in the Visitors' Book and our gentle giant tartly made the following entry in 1872. 'Spent four nights here with great satisfaction. Climbed Sgurr nan Gillean with ditto in what precise space of time it matters not to anyone else, especially to Brown, Jones and Robinson. Supposing I should say '1 hour and 49½ minutes', they might stare, but they might also say, not inaccurately, Walker! The view

from the top was not so fine as I have seen there before, being limited by atmospheric conditions to a radius of about a dozen yards.'

Nicolson had his hard core too. He could come out with comments like: 'The loss of life is a small thing compared with the full and free exercise of our powers and the cultivation of a bold adventurous spirit; and any nation which has ceased to think so is on the fair road to decay . . .'

Nicolson travelled extensively. He once listed some of the other islands he knew and compared them with Skye: Arran – more delightful; Islay – fairest of all; Mull – beauty and grandeur, more green and woody; Jura – queenly but lacking variety; Tiree – too flat yet many charms; Staffa and Iona – a sense of wonder; Barra – rough and rocky; Lewis – boggy; Harris – almost like Skye in mountain grandeur; Skye – *Queen of them all*. And who would argue with such a regal judgment, given by the man who could rightly be regarded as the Cuillins' Prince of the Peaks?



Sgurr nan Gillean, from a photograph taken by Howard Priestman. Readers may wish to refer back three years to p.122 of the 1992 Journal, where R.N. Campbell presented two puzzles about the peak. The third puzzle, obviously, is why this illustration was missed out in 1992.

## THE SMC HUT ROUTE

By Alec Keith

FOR ALL its varied landscapes, and despite the efforts of Grieve et al (SMCJ, 1978, p227) Scotland has no definitive summer or winter outing to compare with the Alpine Haute Route. Such was the topic chewed over by Hamish Irvine and myself one Christmas Eve as we retreated from the Coire Cas car park, our attempts at climbing repulsed in a spray of gravel and small shrubs. Skiing, we decided, should be ignored, the snow too fickle, the province, after all, of the worms; and clearly it is no bad thing that the vibram shod hordes do not have too many classic summer routes to churn up and bury under gas canisters and toilet paper. We gave up and wondered instead if the present shape of the Club (angular and stooped, with a discernible bulge at the midriff) had anything to add to its fine history of long days on the hills, and so it was that Hamish conceived the SMC Hut route.

It was a basic idea, the simple linking of the four SMC huts on foot by any reasonably aesthetic line. Obviously the huts were to be used, and the journey should take as little time as possible, each day leading to a new hut, though for reasons of human frailty the 73-mile stage from the CIC to the Ling could be split with a night at the Cluanie Inn, in keeping with the finest traditions. While countless variations are possible, the distances involved (the route described is 140 miles) mean that the shortest lines are to be preferred. Like any grand plan we agreed it should be done and then many months passed and the Hut route was spoken of only in moments of idle pub banter.

I made a tentative foray from the Ling in the gloom of the following November, but got no further than Aclunashellach before a tendon in one of my knees complained. I hitched home with a clear conscience but was secretly relieved. A sharp exchange with Hamish revealed his unhappiness with my disloyalty, and it was agreed that this was to be a joint project. But I reckoned this pledge could be overlooked for a bit in the light of Hamish's next conception, a conception with a shorter and more predictable period of gestation.

In this window of opportunity I slunk guiltily into the Raeburn one Sunday early last May for a second try. The weather was forecast to be fairly settled but cold, and much snow still lay on the hills. Good

conditions, but I was nervous, unsure if my body was capable of four days' sustained effort without a good rest in between.

I'd not stayed in the Raeburn before; it's a typical committee hut, and its location doesn't inspire. The hut was empty, which was a problem for someone who sees flushing a toilet as a technical challenge, the frighteningly large gas cylinders meant that the cooker was out of the question; the water pump made a lot of noise but would only produce air; and the electricity tripped out at breakfast in the dark.

I was away shortly after five, trotting along the road towards Dalwhinnie, chilled by the morning air but happy to have started at last. The plan was to run a fair amount of the way, but my sack turned out heavier than expected, crammed as it was with a clutter of shoes, maps, bananas, cakes, pit and so on, and my jogging would fade into a painful thrashing motion after a few hours each day. Also there were a lot of bags of a horrible white powder which would no doubt have interested the Constabulary, but it was only an energy drink of uncertain flavour, slightly better swallowed than inhaled. I followed the track along the side of Loch Erich and made good time jogging in the sun to Culra.

On Ben Alder it was still more winter than summer, and I was lured off the Bealach Dubh path on to the Long Leachas ridge, kicking the odd step in hard old snow, topping out on the plateau just as a band of cloud blew over the sun and sat on the summit. As I dropped down to the Uisge Labhair and ran down to Loch Ossian my legs began to seize up and my movements became more sluggish. I stopped for lunch at the hostel with Tom Rigg, receiving an enthusiastic welcome from a puppy called Beinn Eibhinn and a more circumspect one from a stag called Windswept.

After cutting over a boggy shoulder on Leum Uilleum I came down to Loch Chiarain and managed a half-hearted trot down to the Blackwater Reservoir, kept going by the sight of the Buachaille and the Blackmount hills peering round Beinn a'Chrulaiste at me. The final treat was the low pass between the Blackwater dam and Altnafeadh, a real Slough of Despond in which I wallowed haplessly.

It was half past five when I reached Lagangarbh, finding the builders busy with Phase Three of the renovations. There were plenty of signs of their efforts as well as a large hole where the toilet block used to be. After a ritual meal of tuna and pasta I just managed to crawl upstairs to the bunks before falling asleep.

Tuesday was cold, windy, misty and unfriendly. But it was the easy day, the goal being the CIC, so there was time for a lie-in. I plodded stiffly over the Devil's Staircase in drizzle, to indulge the previous day's food fetish (half a chicken) in Kinlochleven, creating an unnecessarily heavy pack for the rest of the day with other, additional goodies. The route was due to cross the Mamores to Steall then go over the Ben to the CIC, but the snow on the higher slopes was going to be pretty icy and my running shoes were a bit



inadequate for that and yes it was still very windy . . . Looking back it was the right decision, although an unsatisfactory one. I sneaked round the Mamores on the West Highland Motorway which took me to an unavoidable tea-stop at one of the Glen Nevis cafes. The youth hostel track up to the Halfway Lochan was as tedious as ever, and great blasts of wind tore down the Allt a' Mhuillinn on the traverse round into Coire Leis. Hadrian's Wall appeared briefly through the murk, icy and complete.

The midweek section of one of our kindred clubs (which can remain anonymous for the usual fee) was in residence in the CIC, including in their number the Hut Guest from Hell, whose activities dominated the hours ahead. His climbing companion freshly choppered off the Ben, the Guest rapidly reduced himself to a state fit for admission to the Belford on a mixture of (other people's) drinks and it was midnight before his rantings turned to garglings and his lights went out. The night was made complete when my mantelshelf on to the top bunk went horribly wrong and I plummeted shins-first on to the wooden frame of the bunk beneath.

After these excitements I slept in on Wednesday, woke, panicked, and shot out of the hut shortly after eight for the next leg, a 33-mile flog to the Cluanie Inn via Banavie and the Caledonian Canal towpath to Gairloch. I eluded a pack of baying dogs while passing through some private-looking grounds in Achnacarry on the way to Loch Arkaig, then followed a vague path up the Allt Dubh, passing a Geal Carn on its east, then going down to another path by the Allt Ailein. My body ground to a halt up here, afternoon nausea caused by a powdered drinks' overdose on top of weariness and a general lack of inspiration. I sat down and thought about being sick. In retrospect any true entrepreneur would have dug in and waited for the arrival of the rescue teams and some cheque-book-waving journalists. Meandering on, mind elsewhere, I fell off the path and tumbled into a bog; thus refreshed I cantered down through forestry to the bridge over the Garry at Aultnaslat.

The weather's foggy ambivalence began to clear now, hazy sunshine peering through, and my mood improved too. After a mile on the road, a path by the Allt a' Ghobhainn took me out of Glen Garry and over into Glen Loyne where there was a big and still and deep river to cross. A pull up steep grass led to the old road and I jogged down at about six o'clock to the Cluanie, which sat in pleasant evening sun, surrounded by a patchwork of green and white hills.

Staying in the hotel was an unaccustomed luxury, and it is easy to see why this lifestyle appeals to Club members both past and present; we younger ones of course would quickly become outsized and indolent if such pleasures were afforded to us on too regular a basis. My aching body enjoyed the comforts of a bar meal, a hot bath, and a soft bed. Sadly it was all over by six as Friday was to be a long day, 40 miles over fairly rough country. From the moment my feet touched the ground it was all pain; it was clear that there was no bounce left and that a day of attrition lay ahead.

I passed by Alltbeithe then headed west to Gleann Gaorsaic and down into Glen Elchaig. It was a clear and cool spring day and I watched wisps of mist being teased off the tops of Beinn Fhada and A'Ghlas-bheinn by a strong north-easterly wind. From Carnach a good path took me over between Faochaig and Aonach Buidhe to Maol-bhuidhe bothy for a lunch of the last of the Dundee cake.

The generally mindless content of the entries in the bothy book indicated that, with the increase in the number of people enjoying the freedom to roam these days, there is a correspondingly greater number of extremely sad people in the hills; by the time I had circumnavigated Beinn Dronaig there was one more. I squatted on a tussock in the middle of a bog near Bearnais, gripped by an energy burnout, strength sapped by the wind, listlessly recalling the tale of a small group of soldiers from colonial days who were surrounded and vastly outnumbered by a ferocious and extremely agitated Enemy. Prospects were grim. A frightened private (let him be called 'Perkins') asked his commanding officer (let him be called 'Sir') 'Why us, Sir, why us?' To which he received the answer, 'Because we are here, Perkins, because we are here.' Mallory wasn't so far off the mark, really. Thus comforted I walked slowly on past Bearnais bothy, up the hillside behind it, and down the other side to splash through the Carron at Achnashellach.

My mood swung back now; it was in the bag. I almost revelled in the grind up from the station to Coire Lair, watching as the evening sun picked out every detail on the hills around me, ignoring my poor battered feet. The bealach between Sgurr Ruadh and Beinn Liath Mhor appeared at last and Torridon spread out ahead, colour fading in the calm of advancing darkness. I stumbled down the last miles to the Ling at about nine, shattered but satisfied. The quality of my celebratory meal of soup and rice left something to be desired, but it no longer mattered. The night was restless, my muscles taking their revenge with some acute cramp attacks. Next day was hot and joyous in Torridon and I made my way back to my car at the Raeburn by bus, train, hitching and bicycle, ready for the weekend's trip to Skye.

The future of the Hut Route is uncertain now, as the Huts sub-committee ponders how to extend its empire. The Hon. Secretary appears to have ignored my suggestion to make a bid for the Cluanie, so the Hut Route may shortly require an extension.

And Hamish? After some cursings he duly abandoned wife and wean a few months later (only temporarily, of course) to complete his own Hut Route, a New, Improved and undoubtedly Better Hut Route; but that's another story.

## HOW MANY HILLS IN SCOTLAND?

By Peter Drummond

THE READER might care to guess at the answer now, and pencil an estimate in the margin. (No peeking at the last paragraph, please.)

Look at Iona on the 1:50000 OS map. It shows four hills – two druids, a cnoc and the highest point Dun I at 100m (332ft). The 1:25000 OS map, with space for more detail, has 10 heights named. Compare these with a map folding out from the book *Iona Past and Present* published in 1934, in which local authors A. and E. Ritchie revealed the depth of the iceberg effect. For they list not 10 but 106 hills on the island, reflecting the islanders' Gaelic culture and their tradition of linking hill-names with history or geography – 62 of them are cnocs, but there are 16 different elements of hill-names. The OS mapmakers show us only the tip of the iceberg, by comparison.

To the question of how many hills there are in Scotland altogether, some people have provided partial answers, in the form of Tables. Munro identified 283, Corbett 219 and Donald 86, totalling 588, plus 302 other tops in the first and last of these Tables, a grand total of 890 – since revised and re-revised to the current total of 876. Of course, Munro and Corbett called their hills 'mountains', with significant contours of 3000ft and 2500ft respectively, separating the mountains from mere hills. But most people who call themselves Munro-baggers or Corbetteers would define their activity as hill-walking, and speak of going on to 'the hill' for the day.

It has long been accepted that using 3000ft or 2500ft contours as cut-offs is quite irrational, since a hill a few feet less is just as grand, possibly harder of access, and subject to promotion or demotion in the Tables as the OS sophisticate their measurement techniques. In the present age of metrication the cut-off heights of 914m and 762m look particularly silly, and defenders must wrap themselves in the mantle of tradition.

Not only is the absolute height a problem, but so too is the degree of differentiation from other hills: Corbett demanded an ascent on all sides of 500ft, a clear if arbitrary rule; Donald had a complex formula in which tops needed an ascent of 100ft on all sides (although only 50ft was allowable if there was 'topographical merit' present), while separate 'hills' needed a 17-unit separation from other tops, a unit being one-twelfth of a mile distance or a 50ft contour drop. Munro had no such rules, clear or arcane,

basing his distinction between mountains and tops on subjective judgment as to what made a separate mountain, thus laying the basis for much subsequent controversy about which summits should be Munros.

Similar problems are found in greater mountain areas: speaking about the Alpine 4000m peaks, McLewin says: '... there is no list of the 4000m peaks that is definitive. All (lists) are unsatisfactory in some way, reflecting the ill-defined nature of the basic concept...' (*Monte Viso's Horizon*, p13). While Reinhold Messner, first to climb all 14 Himalayan 8000m peaks, wrote: 'I am not completely sure that there are 14 eight-thousanders, yet this is what the geographers assert... But this only takes free-standing mountains into account, not the innumerable subsidiary summits. But, (for example) Lhotse is the south summit of Everest, and perhaps it should never have been counted as an independent 8000er at all.' (*All the Eight-Thousanders*, p13.)

Returning to Scotland, everyone knows there are many good hills not in any of the Scottish Tables, revised or unrevised, many famous like Stac Pollaidh or Bennachie. More recently, in 1989, E.J. Yeaman published his highly informative *Handbook of the Scottish Hills* which lists circa 2500 hills (including 66 added since publication – personal communication): his definition of a hill is an eminence with an ascent of 100m on all sides or 5km distance from the nearest height. While this is subject to the same problems of arbitrariness as the other tables – what about ascents of 95m? – it does have the merit of including most of the hills missed out by the famous tables. Perhaps 'doing the Yeamans' along Munro-bagger lines hasn't caught on because of the four-figure total involved.

Now 98% of Yeaman's listed hills have names, marked on maps. To each of the 50 or so eminences without map names he has given a locating name – though probably many of these will have a local spoken name. So we can accept that virtually every hill of consequence in Scotland has a name. Past generations of Gaels, lowland Scots and Borderers did not need precise contours or measured re-ascents as cut-off points, in order to decide which eminences had significance as recognisable hills. Therefore one way we can assess the number of hills in Scotland, free of the classification problems of the Tables above, is to count up the number of hill-names. Easier said than done.

Let us start with Yeaman's listed total of 2450 hills with names (this excludes the 50 nameless on maps, and discounts the double names, such as Ben Arthur's doppelganger The Cobbler). There are certain to be more hill-names than this, because of his 100m cut-off criterion – but how many more? One could of course spend a few weeks with OS maps, counting them; the 80 or so Landranger sheets covering Scotland might seem quite a mountain to climb, but it becomes Himalayan when you accept that you will have to use the 1:25000 scale maps (there are about 600 of them!) because they contain names that 1:50000 maps don't.



Or you could spend much time with the OS Gazetteer which lists every place-name appearing on all of Britain's 1:50000 maps, alphabetically. This latter course is not too hard for the Gaelic hill-names, since the generic element (beinn, meall, carn, etc.) is often – but not always – at the start of the name, and conveniently appears in alphabetic blocks to be counted: but to pick up all the hill-names ending with a generic element, whether Gaelic or English or Scots (e.g. – Glas Bheinn, Carnethy Hill, or Traprain Law), would require a search through all the 250,000 entries. Even then you would have to go back constantly to maps to check whether a Creag or a Sron, for example, is simply a crag or nose, or is actually a hilltop (as Creag Meagaidh and Sron a' Choire Ghairbh are): in upper Deeside, for instance, just more than half of the Creags listed in Adam Watson's book are rocky hilltops, the others being crags or outcrops.

So how can we arrive at a reasonable estimate of the number of Scottish hill-names? With the emphasis on estimate, here is one possibility. Starting with Yeaman's list, I extracted and counted only those beginning with some of the commoner generic Gaelic elements (and a few English elements like Hill of . . .) so that I could make a comparison with the numbers listed in the OS Gazetteer. Some Gaelic elements, like dun, I ignored because of the ambiguity in the Gazetteer – they could be forts as well as hills. The elements I chose are listed in the table at the end of this article.

I found that there were 1494 hill-names beginning with these chosen elements in Yeaman, and 7125 beginning with the same elements in the OS Gazetteer. On the assumption that other name-elements, Gaelic or English, in Yeaman's Handbook (altogether 2450) are in the same ratio of 1:4.77, then the OS Gazetteer probably contains approximately 11,686 Scottish hill-names, from the 1:50000 maps.

We will return to this figure in a moment – while noting that the assumption of the 1:4.77 ratio includes a variation ranging from 1:2.2 for the more mountainous categories of beinns and sgurrs, through 1:4.75 for the mid-height mealls, to 1:16 for the lower cnocs and torrs. (The fact that the mean ratio virtually coincides with that for meall, which is also the median and the probable mode in height terms, strengthens the case for the 1:4.77 ratio applying.)

Adam Watson and Elizabeth Allan's book *The Place Names of Upper Deeside* (1984) is a very comprehensive guide to the 7000 names in their chosen area, names coming from OS maps, local informants, and other sources. Almost exactly 10% of these – 698 in my count – are names of hilltops. Of this 700 or so, only 180 appear on 1:50000 maps, a further 95 on 1:25000 maps, and 425 came from local informants (or old estate plans, books, etc.), not being on published maps. Now upper Deeside has not been a Gaelic-speaking area for many decades, and it is highly probable that the number of local names for hills here is less per square mile than in western

areas where the Gaelic language still is, or was recently, the main tongue. The example of Iona given at the start of this article, with four 1:50000 mapped hills compared to 106 known on the ground, would support this. If we make the reasonable assumption that the ratios on upper Deeside hold good for Scotland as a whole, then we can advance our cautious calculations further.

Returning to the 11,686 figure of 1:50000 mapped hill-names, and applying the ratio of 1:1.54 from upper Deeside (of 1:50000 to 1:25000 names), we can conclude that current OS maps of all scales show in total probably 17,996 Scottish hill-names. And further, taking upper Deeside's ratio of mapped to unmapped names, which is also, intriguingly, 1:1.54, we can expect 27,715 hill-names not on current OS maps. Adding OS-mapped and unmapped names together we can estimate that Scotland has around 45,711 named hills. Let us say 45,000 for a round figure. Since Scotland is just under 79,000 square kilometres in area, this suggests just more than two mapped hill-names and three unmapped in every block of nine square kilometres, which does not seem unrealistic in a country as unsmooth as ours.

As it happens, Watson and Allan's study of upper Deeside turned up 700 hill-names in an area which is circa 1.5% of the Scottish landmass: if this area is typical, Scotland would indeed have just more than 46,000 hill-names. It may be objected that upper Deeside is not typical of Scotland's topography. True. But it contains grand sweeping mountains that may yield fewer names per square area than in lower undulating country – a glance at a map of, say, the Buchan lowlands will show this – and further, it is an area where the Gaelic tongue fell silent much earlier than in the huge areas west of the Great Glen, losing many hill-names in the process. In effect upper Deeside is probably a good average for the country, erring possibly even on the low side.

As the Iona experience demonstrates, we have probably lost thousands of names with the decline of the Gaelic language as the repository of local knowledge, both during the enforced Clearances from the glens last century, and from the ongoing decline of the culture. Further proof comes from a survey of the Back area of Lewis, still today at the heart of a Gaelic-speaking area: in a single square kilometre there, there were 27 hill-names – 20 cnocs, 6 creag(an)s and a sithean. (School of Scottish Studies – personal communication, Dr Ian Fraser.)

So 45,000 may well represent the minimum number of hills (of known name) in Scotland, from the highest mountain to the smallest rocky cnocan, but nevertheless recognisable hills to local people. And to think that Munro compleaters rest on their laurels after a mere 277! How does the figure square with the reader's guesstimate?

ELEMENT	A YEAMAN	B OS GAZETTEER	A as % of B
An	49	c.123	40%
Aonach	9	26	34%
Barr	6	c.45	13%
Beannan	1	8	12%
Beinn	361	789	45%
Ben	118	174	68%
Bin/n	2	6	33%
Bidean/ein	7	11	64%
Binnean/ein	8	18	44%
Biod	5	13	38%
Braigh	5	45	11%
Cairn	29	c.300	10%
Caisteal	2	24	8%
Carn	124	740	16%
Cnap/knap	3	42	7%
Cnoc/an	66	1035	6%
Creag (50% of OS-listed creags used)	101	c.510	19%
Cruach/an	45	279	16%
Druim	21	300	7%
Fell -	4	18	22%
Hill of -	52	c.400	12%
Knock	20	280	7%
Maol	7	125	6%
Meall	217	1030	21%
Monadh	6	38	31%
Mullach	21	66	31%
Sgiadh	3	14	21%
Sgor/r	26	52	50%
Sgurr	97	213	45%
Sidh/ean	6	83	7%
Spidean	4	5	80%
Stob	37	c.100	37%
Stuc/hd	4	15	26%
Torr/an	9	160	6%
Vord, Ward	19	38	50%
TOTAL	1494	7125	21%